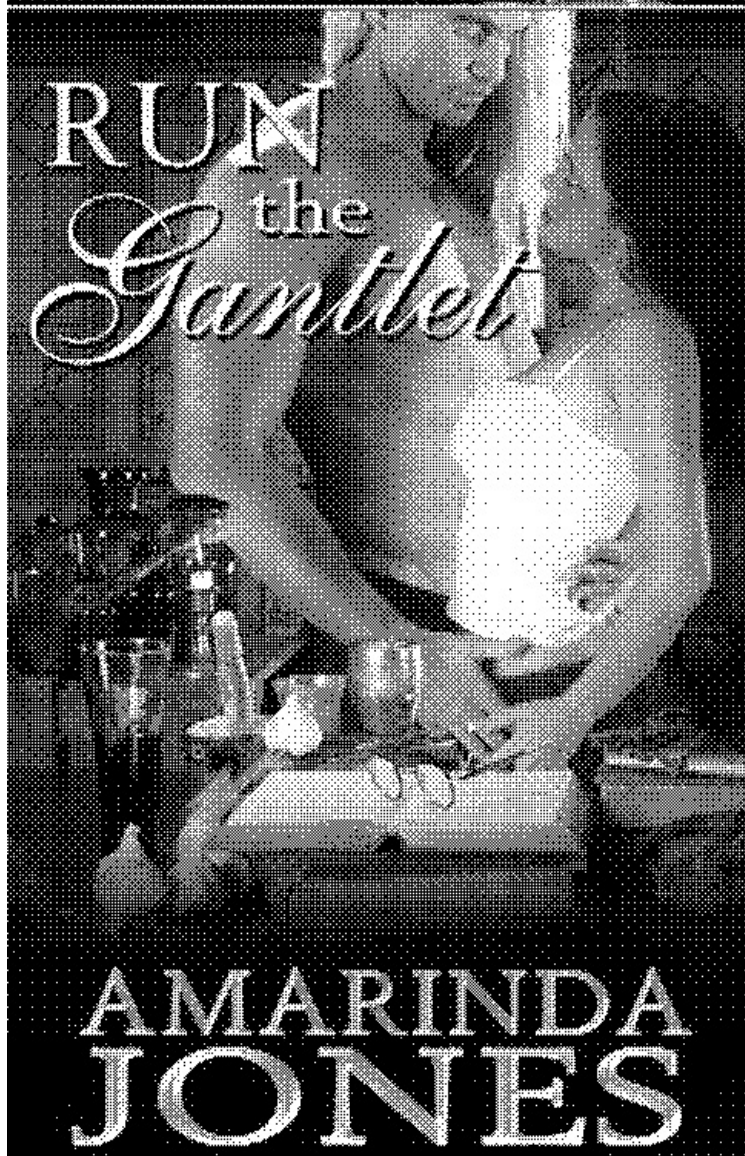


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Run the Gantlet

ISBN 9781419921162

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Edited by Helen Woodall

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book Publication July 2009

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RUN THE GANTLET

Amarinda Jones

Dedication

Vampires—hot, sexy and wantable. Thank the cosmos they exist.

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Chapter One

“What?” Eloise Gaunt was not in the mood for amateur dramatics.

“I cannot tell you.”

Eloise rolled her eyes and pulled her hand from the woman’s grip. “You just sucked in your breath and looked all terrified.” Well, as terrified as a suburban gypsy with two screaming children fighting in the next room could. “You either tell me or I’m not paying for the rest of this reading, Madame Cherylene.” It was not exactly a name that inspired confidence in psychic abilities.

The suburban gypsy in question yelled at her children to shut up and stop fighting. She then adjusted the turban-like scarf around her head. “I see darkness.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if you see anything at all. The lighting is crap in here.” Eloise was all for atmosphere, but she just knew she was going to bang her knee viciously on something on the way out of this darkened room, and she needed no half-assed fortune teller to tell her that. Candles were only good in blackouts as far as Eloise was concerned.

“You must take this seriously.”

Eloise sighed deeply. *Why do I put myself through this?* “Okay. So tell me.” She needed to hear some fantastical story that she could laugh at and walk away from, forty dollars poorer but feeling safe.

“There is a dark one from ancient times.”

“Uh-huh,” Eloise murmured yet stiffened at the words. *Not what I want to hear.*

“A blond, blue-eyed man.”

“You just said he was dark.” Eloise knew she could act as flippant as she liked but she knew what that darkness was.

Madame Cherylene looked at her with a strange, almost-fearful look. “His soul is dark.”

“Right. Dark soul, blond hair, blue eyes. Any other distinguishing features?” *And please tell me how and when I can avoid meeting him.*

“He is a vampire.” The woman’s words gushed out in both horror and fascination.

“Oh crap.” Of all the things Eloise did not want to hear that was it.

“Fuck! You mean I’m actually right?” Madame Cherylene looked amazed. “They really exist?”

“Yeah, unfortunately so.” Eloise ran her hand through her messy, shoulder-length, dark brown hair. The clip holding it in place had long since giving up trying to contain all the unruly waves.

“Jeez, you knew already, didn’t you?” Madame Cherylene pulled her turban off and dropped it on the table with a thump. “Were you testing me?”

Eloise watched as the fake diamond fell out and clattered onto the wooden surface. “No, I was testing myself more than you.” She was not surprised that the woman was confused. It was hard to explain even the simplest life to another person, let alone one involving a vampire. “I was hoping you’d be some carnival hack who would tell me I would meet a tall, dark, handsome man who would sweep me off my feet and have two-point-four children, a mortgage, put on thirty pounds and divorce my husband.” *But no, I can’t be normal like everyone else.*

“You know I get the feeling he does not want you.”

Eloise snorted at her words. “Well, right back at him.” She wanted no part of this herself. *Okay, time to stop spinning my wheels and to make some sort of plan.* For the last two weeks she had been feeling on edge and this just added to it. The overwhelming need to get in her car and drive as far out of Brisbane as she could gripped Eloise with a new surge of panic. Though how far was far enough? That this vampire did not want her was the least of her concerns. None of this was about love or need. “I will not be a slave to fate.”

Madame Cherylene shook head. “Don’t you get it? You have no choice. This is not a question of choosing a path. There is only one direction for both of you.”

The woman was right but that did not mean much to Eloise. She had been going against the odds for years. “Unless his path is directly past the supermarket for Tim Tams then we will not meet.” A road trip and panic always required chocolate.

“He is your destiny.”

“Oh bugger off, he is not.” Eloise stood up. She had exactly fifty-two dollars in her purse, was low on gas, had a maxed-out credit card and a bunch of courtesy cards for buy-one-get-one-free coffee and muffins. If she traveled slowly and stopped at all the Muffin Stops she would probably make it just west past Ipswich. Not exactly the back of beyond but it was a start.

“Running away doesn’t help.”

Great. A woman with a fake turban and feral children was giving her advice. *But then I asked for it. I’m desperate.* “It doesn’t hurt.” *Though I am going to have to change these shoes before I do.* They looked fantastic on Eloise but a mad dash to safety required flat soles and non-pointy toes.

“It’s too late for whatever you plan to do.” Madam Cherylene shook her head at her.

Eloise knew that. She always had. *I just never thought it would get to this stage.* “Okay so I invest in garlic and crucifixes.” That was doable. She loved garlic, and crucifixes were always a fashion statement.

The clairvoyant yelled at her children again and then turned to her client. “I think that only happens with movie vampires.”

Ouch! Eloise banged her knee on the table. *I just knew I would do that.* “So what stops them?” She reached down to massage the pain away.

“Some things cannot be stopped.”

Eloise blew out a sigh and handed the woman the rest of the money. “Yeah, yeah, I know that. What is foretold cannot be stopped.”

She had been hearing that from her great Uncle McManus Gaunt since she turned eighteen. “Jeez, why couldn’t I have been normal and have lost my virginity years ago?” Eloise muttered to herself as she left the house. “But oh no, I had to want ‘the one’ and he just happens to be a frigging vampire.” It was true. Eloise knew she could not be what she wasn’t and some things were destined to happen no matter how much she wanted to prove otherwise.

* * * * *

Fourteen years ago

Uncle McManus was her guardian and the last known Gaunt standing other than herself.

“It is written lass.”

“Who wrote it?” Eloise loved him but he was a crazy old coot with wild dark eyes, thick, woolly gray hair and was rarely seen without a glass of scotch in his hand. It made her wonder if it was *written* in fine-grained malt in his mind.

“You know our clan is from the town of Wick in Scotland?”

Of course she did. Her uncle had been telling her about the Gaunt family as soon as she had been old enough to form sentences. “Yes, in the county of Caithness in the Highlands of Scotland.” Like any Highlander born and bred, McManus Gaunt had firm beliefs on who was a “true” Highlander and he made sure Eloise knew her heritage.

“Aye, and your ancestress Caitriona and you are linked through destiny.”

“Okay,” Eloise had murmured, thinking maybe it was time to start marking off the amount in his scotch bottles to indicate consumption and the likelihood of wild storytelling.

“Caitriona died for love.” His eyes focused hard on hers. “She decreed nearly a thousand years ago that a woman of Gaunt a thousand years in the future would be tested for her love of her soul mate.”

Soul mates? They believed in pop psychology even back then? “Why?” Had this Caitriona woman been prey to the bottle herself? Some of the best ramblings happened under the influence of alcohol. Or was this some crazy story passed down and elaborated on with every generation?

“Because she fell in love with a vampire and he betrayed Caitriona and it broke her heart.”

Eloise arched her eyebrows. “A vampire? Seriously?” She looked at him and the bottle at his elbow. Was it fueling his story just a tad?

“They exist, lass. Vampires are all around us. We pass by them without knowing. They seek out only those who understand them.”

“Riiight. How much have you had to drink today, Uncle Mac?”

He looked at her in all seriousness. “Don’t be flippant about this girl. If you fail the test your life will be forfeited.”

Whoa. That was not something Eloise expected to hear. The look in his eyes was extremely grave and serious. A cold shiver of apprehension ran up her spine. “Me fail the test? Why me?”

“You are the last Gaunt woman of our line, lass.”

The way her uncle said that made fine hairs on the back of her neck stand up. “But how could I—”

McManus held up his hand. “In fourteen years from now the thousand years is up. You will be tested and there is naught you can do about it. My duty is to warn you.”

Naught? Those weren’t odds she cared for. *Warn me?* “But—”

“You cannot fight fate, lass.” He shook his head at the thought of it. “He will come regardless. No other man will tempt you as he shall.”

“He?” It sounded so final, so definite. Although at eighteen, Eloise had no idea what she wanted to do with her life, having to deal with some weird family story was not on her list of career ambitions.

“A vampire of your own.” McManus reached over and patted her hand. “It will either be the making of you or—”

“Or what?” Eloise looked at him in trepidation. After hearing this, she wished he were drunk.

“Just don’t fail, lass. You must appease Caitriona’s restless spirit and pass her test.”

Eloise looked at him in horror. “There’s a test?

“Seven in fact and there is no way out of them.”

“Holy crap, talk about not being able to pick your relatives.”

McManus nodded his head. “Aye, but you will be fine. You’re a woman of Gaunt.”

Jeez, I wish I was a Jones.

* * * * *

Present Day

“Oh hell.” It was *her*. Arrow sensed the dark-haired woman before he saw her. He knew this was going to happen one day. His mortal mother, descended from a long line of Celts, had explained it to him as soon as he was old enough to understand.

“The men of my clan know their true love instantly. Some dream of her. Some can hear her thoughts. Your true love will come to you when you are ready. Do not fight it. It is meant to be.”

His vampire father had merely shrugged his shoulders. “It is fate and you must deal with it.”

Vampires were pragmatic. Things were either black or white. The problem was, the more mortal blood in his veins, the harder it was to be pragmatic. Then there were the dreams. Arrow had seen the woman’s face in his dreams so many times that he knew every line and every curve of her almost as well as his own. Problem was his dreams never told him when she would appear and Arrow just did not expect it to be today. His hands curled into fists. Damn fate. He had been having the worst luck lately and this just added to it. After he had managed to extricate himself from the mess in Serawych, he had hoped for some peace, easy sex and uncomplicated blood flow, but no, he had to deal with some puny-assed human. “I am just not in the mood for this today.” But then any day would not be good as far as Arrow was concerned. This was going to screw up his life. “I just know it.” She was almost upon him. Arrow could feel it. The overwhelming urge to take off grabbed at him. He sighed. If he had learned nothing else Arrow knew running got him nowhere. He had to face life and deal with it.

For centuries most of his lovers were happy to provide whatever he needed from them. Arrow called no one his and so far that had worked for him. Yes, he had been lonely but not enough that he wanted to take on a woman full-time in his life. That was just wrong for a vampire. They needed freedom to be, do and take whatever they desired when they wanted it. If he believed the curse that was muttered by the Scottish woman a thousand years ago he was going to be stuck with not only the dreaded monogamy but mortality as well. Neither concept worked for Arrow. He was seven hundred years old and he had grown accustomed to his lifestyle. “I am not going to change for some flibbertigibbet of a mortal.” The scent of the approaching woman filled the air. Lilacs and roses. Old-fashioned yet beautiful. All of Arrow’s senses were on red alert. He knew he had to be careful how he handled this.

“Damn it, why me?” That was the part he still did not get. Why out of all the possible choices of mortal men had he been marked as the one? His mother, also a mortal, had simply smiled and explained that some things were destined to be and that he could not fight his fate. He had been born to love her. His mother’s words still echoed in his ears. Born for one person alone? Love? That was crazy. After seven hundred years of walking the Earth and enjoying the delights of many women, Arrow had almost forgotten the whole business with the Scottish wench. Until now.

When the woman came into view, Arrow swore. *That would be right*. Make her luscious just to make it harder. Her spiked heels clattered to a stop before him.

“Oh no fucking way.” Her eyes were wide with shock and disgust.

Arrow was angry at her look of disdain. It made him feel as if he lacked something and no woman had ever made him feel that way before.

“Hey, it’s not like I want you either, mortal, so just keep moving.” Though how she did in those ridiculous ankle boots was beyond Arrow. They were decorated with chains and studs and looked delicate but sturdy enough to kick in a wall with those sharply pointed toes. His eyes traced up the curved legs covered with net stockings to a gypsy black skirt that was cinched with a studded belt at her waist. The white gauzy peasant blouse she wore did nothing to hide the shape of her full breasts. It was peasant Goth and yet it suited her. *And why the fuck can’t I look away from her ?* Arrow was a past master of cool disinterest. Yet all he felt at that moment was his balls tightening in anticipation. *No, not her. Down, boys.*

“Touch me and I’ll drop you like a rock.” She stood her ground, hands on hips and eyes narrowed.

Arrow snorted in amusement. She had to be kidding. She was five nothing to his six-foot-three frame. “That’s hysterical, shorty. I would be all over you before you could stop me.” Dark brown eyes looked back at him in anger as her crooked lips narrowed. She was no beauty but she was fascinating in a sensual way. Hot and wild—that was it. *Oh hell, what am I thinking? I do not want this one.* Arrow held his hands up and away from his body. “I have no intention of touching you.” He deliberately bared his fangs but the woman did not flinch.

“Is that supposed to scare me, fang face?”

Okay, that was cute. The way she said “fang face” made Arrow smile. “You talk tough.” He normally liked that in women. It made their surrender so much sweeter.

“I am tough.” She tossed her hair in dismissal. “Now be a good little vampire and let me pass.”

As much as Arrow wanted to do exactly that, he had to admit the idea of toying with her a bit would be fun. *Good little vampire?* She had spirit. He had to give her that. Arrow did not believe he had to be a slave to a curse but he wanted to check this woman out just for the hell of it before she moved on.

Or what? You'll drop me?" Before she lashed out and kicked in the shin. "Hey!" *Yep, those points hurt.* He was immortal but not immune to pain and he had not seen that coming.

"And there's more from where that came from, fang face." She looked quite pleased with herself.

"You know it might just be worth taking you to teach you a lesson." Arrow was pleased when he saw just a hint of fear in her gaze. As much as he liked feisty women, he knew they were never as tough as they seemed.

"Oh please." She rolled her eyes at him. "Neither of us wants to be stuck with the other for an eternity, now do we?"

She was right. While his mother had believed in the idea of true love, it didn't mean Arrow did. If they had sex, then technically that fulfilled the first part of the Scottish woman's curse. Why tempt fate? Arrow was not looking for a wife. Besides she looked liked the cranky kind and he preferred women to kiss and not kick him. And despite the whole immortal thing, Arrow wasn't the forever kind when it came to women and he was well aware what would happen if they mated.

"So back off, fang face."

Arrow leaned back against a wall. He had to be calm. He now knew who she was. That was good. He knew who to avoid in future. He would get the hell out of Brisbane, Australia, before he had to see her again. Arrow stopped and thought about that. *Why should I leave town?* He had found a gang of fellow vampires here who amused him. *I will just avoid her. I can do that. There are other women much more alluring than her.* Though his mind could tell him one thing, his body was telling him another and it wanted her.

"Pass by, mortal. I will not touch you." Arrow adjusted his stance to relieve the sudden pressure on his cock. It was hard to believe being kicked in the shin was a turn-on to him.

"Lucky for you."

"You do know we'll meet again." They were doomed that way.

Eloise blew out a deep sigh. "Yeah, I do."

So it weighed on her mind as it did his. "How long do you think you can hold out?" Arrow was aware how much the personal cost of this curse was on her.

"Forever." Her words were firm and in control. "I'm stubborn and a woman so I have more patience than you."

Arrow snorted. "So you're never gonna have sex?" He saw the shock on her face. "Oh yeah, I know the curse as well as you, shorty. You remain a virgin until I take you. No other man can touch you." The woman spluttered in indignation. Where had the feisty shin kicker gone? Arrow's gaze roamed her breasts. It was a damn shame to leave this one untouched. His cock tightened a little further at the knowledge of how tight she would be holding him inside her body.

"Oh I've been touched a lot," she told him in defiance.

"Your own hands don't count and never by me, shorty." And suddenly Arrow wanted to touch and taste. He just knew her blood would be superb. And that body? Infinitely fuckable. This was his woman and— *Head slap. What the hell am I thinking? I can't touch her. Stop thinking with your cock.*

"What?" she backed away from him as if she sensed his thoughts.

"Nothing." *Everything. I don't know Stop looking at her breasts, man.*

Her arms automatically crossed over her chest. "Don't even think about it."

"Hey, I'm a vampire I naturally have romance in my soul." That was his one downfall. He loved everything about women.

"And I'm descended from the kings of Scotland, fang face, and I will kick your ass if you even think of trying that romance shit on me."

Romance shit? Arrow laughed. *This is my soul mate?* He loved a challenge such as this lady presented. There could be worse fates than being linked to mortal.

"Piss off and leave me alone."

"Trust me I plan to." Arrow knew he had to work at directing his blood flow back to his brain.

"Good." She stomped off past him.

Chapter Two

Eloise was shaking so hard she had to stop and lean against the brick wall in between two shops. That encounter had unnerved her more than she imagined it would. First, it confirmed what she had read. Not all vampires were susceptible to sunlight. It depended on how long they had been around. Madam Cherylene had said "ancient". Of course Madam Cherylene probably thought anything from the 1960s was "ancient".

Eloise suspected this particular vampire was old but not overly so. She had forced herself to read up on vampires, believing forewarned was indeed forearmed. She knew vampires were either cursed as such or born from a mortal-vampire union and that these individuals had the ability to adapt and

to evolve with the times. Despite all her research the one thing that Eloise hadn't expected was a wild, intense need to touch him. She had been so worried about meeting him that need had not been an issue to consider.

"Where the hell did that come from?" she muttered as she tried to control her breathing. Her heart was racing. The vampire was drop-dead gorgeous. Ash blond, collar-length hair, sexy blue eyes and a body she wanted to crawl all over and lick. There were so many naughty things a woman could do with a man like that. Eloise had a feeling he would encourage all of them. "What am I thinking?" She slapped her forehead. "Snap out of it. He's bad for you."

"Do you know what I was thinking?"

Eloise shrieked when the bad vampire in question suddenly appeared at her side. She had heard they were quick. Eloise willed herself not to move. This was all about being strong and avoiding temptation. If she flinched she was doomed. Her eyes moved down his body. He was expensively dressed in a fine black leather jacket, black silk shirt and— *Whoa!* His black trousers did nothing to hide the large bulge at his groin. Eloise swallowed hard. That could not be for her, surely? She looked up at his eyes. The desire she saw both scared and excited her.

"Thinking? I'm happy you have a hobby. Now what part of 'go away' didn't you understand?" Eloise knew, despite her bravado, she was in deep trouble. This man—this vampire—had her total attention and what she was thinking of doing with him was beyond everything she had trained herself not to do or need.

"You're a pissy little thing."

"You have no idea, fang face." She wanted to look away from him but that was impossible. It was like handing her chocolate and telling her not to eat it.

"Let's get this over and done with, shorty," he said as he moved closer toward her. "Let's do the deed."

"Do the deed? Jeez, how romantic." This was not how she imagined this would happen. Eloise had expected he would try to sweep her off her feet and that she would stoically resist because she was too strong to give in to a flight of fancy muttered by a suicidal ancestress. The vampire was acting as if it were a business transaction that they could both walk away from and it wasn't. That dented her ego. "You dazzle me with your charm—not."

"Do you want charm, shorty?" He smiled widely. "I can charm the pants off you."

Eloise did not doubt that for a second. He was all potent male and hard-bodied sex. All her hormones were on red alert. They wanted one thing and her mind was slapping them into control. "Steady on, fang face. I'm not that desperate." *My pants will stay on.*

"Come on." He stood before her, leaving only the barest space between their bodies. "Think about it. We mate, have fantastic sex and then we move on."

Uh-oh. His hands went to either side of her body on the wall behind her. Eloise felt dizzy. *Too close... oh but he smells fantastic and...* "Move on where?" Was that her voice? All breathless and low? "We're screwed. We have to stay together for life when—I mean if—we mate." When had this become a "when" situation? Her eyes went to his. Eloise saw the amusement within and something else. *Recognition? Uh-oh.* "I sure as hell do not want forever with you."

"Shorty, I'm not about to hold you back, besides I don't like clingy women."

Eloise was affronted. She pushed at his chest. *Oh my.* Hot, male heat shot up her arms. "I'm not clingy." She looked at his lips. How would they taste? *What?*

"You look clingy." He smiled. "Whatcha looking at?"

"You ever bite your own lip with those things?" The fangs did not bother her. She had thought they might but they were so much a part of him that they seemed natural and kind of sexy and... *Stop it.* Next thing she'd be kissing him.

"Thinking of kissing me, shorty?"

Whoa! Head spin. "No." *Maybe...possibly...no. Oh crap. I'm in deep trouble.* Eloise wanted to kiss him more than she wanted to push him away.

"Yeah you were." He looked pleased. "I'm hot."

"Oh for God's sake. Talk about being arrogant." He was right though. The vampire was hot and she was burning up just looking at him. What would it be like if she kissed him?

"Bet you can't kiss me and walk away."

The odds on that bet were lousy. "Oh I could." *Sorta...probably not.* That was what terrified her. Eloise wanted to kiss him and there had been so few kissable men in her life.

"Do it then." His body settled against hers. "Prove how much you don't want me."

Oh perfect. His body molded against hers as if it had found a home. Eloise gulped. "I'm not falling for that." His cock pressed against her stomach and she knew every inch of her would smell like him. "You're just horny and not thinking. Whereas I am and I'm not going through eternity joined to you, fang face." Her own words did not convince her. What was the chance the vampire would back off? Or that she would not make the biggest mistake of her life? What had Uncle McManus said? There was naught she could do about it?

"Come on. One kiss." His hands encircled her waist. "Prove to me that this curse is just that."

Eloise had heard the theory that if you faced your fears you destroyed them. She was all for bucking the system. But should she? Her eyes went to his mouth once more. "One kiss, no tongue." *Crap. Why did I say that?*

He chuckled. "Spoilsport. Well?"

"What?" Eloise had been kissed before. It had never been a big deal. She knew this was. Her heart hammered and her knees were wobbly. With any luck she would faint and wake up later to find out it was a dream. Dreams were safe. This vampire was not.

"Kiss me, you know you want to," Arrow teased.

Eloise gripped the expensive silk of his shirt as she searched for her last measure of control. "Why do I have to kiss you?" It would have been nice if he had been so caught up in his wild passion for her that he could not wait to kiss her. But no. She was on the spot and he was waiting for her to make a move. It was not exactly the stuff of great romance.

"Because you want me bad."

She snorted at his words. "Does this approach work with other woman because I must tell you it's not attractive?" *Oh but it was.*

"I'll meet you halfway." He moved his head in closer to hers.

His breath was warm on her face and she wanted nothing more than to dissolve against him. Kiss the vampire. Prove the curse wrong and move on. That's all this was. Eloise moved forward so her lips were almost on his.

"You are really very short," he murmured as his lips hovered teasingly over hers.

"And you are freakishly tall." She licked her lips to entice him. It was a game of who would give in first.

"Kiss me." He breathed words out.

Oh boy. Eloise knew she was doomed. "No, you kiss me." And he did and she knew it was the biggest mistake of her life. Suddenly everything she had ever thought mismatched about her aligned. Her whole body shook as his mouth took possession of hers in a kiss so hungry that she gasped and welcomed his tongue into her mouth. As the kiss deepened, she gave in completely. Eloise found it impossible not to kiss him back. To have done anything else would have been madness. It was so primal and fierce and meant to be.

"Damn," he muttered as his mouth left hers. They looked at each other in wonder.

Eloise grabbed at the lapels of his jacket to stop herself from slithering down his body in a slumberous heap. That was as bad as it was good. "We shouldn't have done that."

"No," he agreed in a halfhearted manner.

She closed her eyes and felt his hot breath on her face. "We should never do that again." Yet Eloise could not stop herself rubbing her body against his. It just felt so right.

"No, never again, after this." And then he kissed her again, not giving her a chance to stop him. "You taste so sweet," he murmured between kisses.

Eloise felt as if she were drowning in sensation. She pushed back from him. "But so does candy and it's a lot less complicated," she whispered against his mouth, unable to stop her tongue touching his lower lip for another taste.

He growled in satisfaction as his hands slid down to her ass. "I like complicated."

"What about Caitriona?"

"I don't want her."

His hands felt so good on her butt that she could not control her need to rub her groin against his. "You're just hot and needy for any woman." And never before had Eloise wanted a man like this.

"No, only you."

Eloise doubted that. This vampire was pure sex. "I don't want forever with you." When she looked in his eyes, she wasn't sure what she wanted. There were so many conflicting emotions running rampant inside her body. Her skin tingled where he touched her and she could feel the wet heat between her legs.

"The plan is we have one-off, unforgettable sex and walk away from each other. You can feel how great we would be together." His mouth was once more on hers. As he ended the kiss, he slowly released her bottom lip from his mouth, his fangs lightly teasing the flesh. "Let's give into need and not complicate it any further."

Eloise closed her eyes, breathing heavily as his lips continued to tease hers with light, nipping kisses. At that moment, togetherness felt as if it would be a very good thing. "Um yeah, but what about—"

"I promise I'll walk away and never see you again."

She could see in his eyes he meant it. The problem was, Eloise wasn't sure how she was supposed to walk away as if nothing had ever happened. This wasn't some peck-on-the-cheek, I'll-see-you-later type of thing. This was hotter than that. This was why women got all silly over men. This was lust and she wanted more.

"Here? It's not exactly romantic." Even as the words came out of her mouth, Eloise knew that she had never had a chance in hell of fighting this attraction. *It is written, lass.*

“No, you’re right. Not for our first time.”

Oh crap. First time? What happened to the walking away thing? “Um—”

His arms wrapped around her waist. “Hold on to me.”

“Why?” Eloise barely had time to grab his shoulders as they started moving so fast she could barely catch her breath. It was as if she were on a high-speed train. Colors and images flitted by so quickly and the sound of intense white noise was deafening. When they stopped, she fell on her butt in the sand. Sand? Her fingers ran through the golden grains. Eloise looked up and saw the spreading fronds of a palm tree.

“Ah, where are we?” Though the palm trees, gentle breeze and the clear blue water was a dead giveaway.

“Deserted island in the Pacific.” He kicked off his shoes and started removing his clothes.

Eloise shuffled back on her ass away from him. hell’s bells. His shoulders were massive, and his chest? She had the wild urge to run her tongue over his skin. “Er—”

“What?” He threw the shirt to the ground as his hands went to the buckle of his belt.

“This is a really bad idea because we both know— Wow!” Her eyes opened in amazement at the size of his cock. Sure, she had seen them before but not one like that. Good grief! How would that even work inside her? “Oh my…” Eloise could not stop staring at the hard, twitching flesh.

He kicked his pants away. “You like?”

“I am agog.” That this man wanted her was amazing. Wasn’t like supposed to attract like? She was hardly in his league. He was the stuff cover models were made of.

“Women usually are.”

“You are so arrogant.” *And I have to stop looking at his cock.* But it was like not mentioning the proverbial elephant in the room. It was just there.

“I know.” He took no offense at that. He merely smiled and dropped to his knees before her and started pulling at her boots.

He had quick hands. But then he had probably undressed hundreds of women. “I hate sand between my toes.” That sounded so dumb to Eloise but for the life of her she could not think of anything else to say. “Stop” was beyond her and “fuck me now” was hovering on her lips. She had gone from good girl to bad in seconds.

He tossed her boots over his shoulder. “I promise I’ll keep your feet up.” He lifted her legs to his shoulders, making her fall backward on the sand. His hands slid up her legs, pushing up the black skirt. “Oh man,” he murmured when he saw that her net stockings were thigh-highs. “Very nice.” His hands caressed her inner thighs until he reached her panties. “Even nicer.” Arrow cupped her pussy through the fabric.

Eloise’s head fell back at the gentle, insistent pressure between her legs. Although she was a little embarrassed that she was so exposed and wet with need, the vampire did not seem to mind one bit. His eyes were focused totally on her. It made Eloise feel strangely powerful.

“You like?” He smiled at her.

“Yes.” Any other answer would have been a lie.

He tugged at the fabric between her legs and ripped her panties off.

When his fingers found her clit, Eloise moaned out loud. If those three fingers could make her feel so needy, she wondered what the rest of him could do to her.

“Take your blouse off, shorty. I don’t want to rip it.” He saw her hesitation. “Forget Caitriona. This is just a one-off. Let’s prove the whole curse wrong.” He dropped his mouth to her clit and sucked hard.

Eloise screamed. Birds screeched in fright. *So this is how Tarzan got the animals’ attention . Lucky Jane.* She started ripping off her blouse. She wanted him. She needed him. Naked seemed the best option at the moment. The position Eloise was in was awkward. She did not want him to stop sucking but it made it hard to remove her bra. “Fang face… What’s your real name?” She had been so caught up in him that something as simple as a name had seemed unimportant.

He lifted his head. “Arrow, but I like the way you call me fang face. It’s so sexy.” His hands moved up her body until he reached her bra. Arrow’s mouth descended on one lace-covered nipple.

Oh my. Eloise squirmed under his seeking mouth. She needed no encumbrances. “I’m Eloise Gaunt and please get this damn bra off me.” The careful good girl who had been about the best intentions was gone.

“Beautiful Eloise.” Arrow leaned over her body and sliced each bra strap with his fangs.

His disposing of her bra was so hot and possessive Eloise could not care less that the bra had cost sixty dollars. The only thing that mattered was the man who lay between her legs, fondling her breasts. Arrow’s cock was hard and throbbing against her stomach, awaiting her command. Only one thought consumed Eloise. “We need a condom.” She was no longer scared of the unknown. It had raced in and overwhelmed her and she wanted more. That was unusual, given the circumstances. In the past, even if she had been remotely interested in a man she had always stopped before it got too far. It was almost as if she had a big rubber band wrapped around her, letting her go so far then snapping her back into place and stopping her from going further. It was crazy of course. Eloise knew she was the mistress of her own destiny and body. Yet the thought that there could be something more than just a quick fuck to scratch an itch resonated in her mind. While she did not believe in fairy tales, the idea of true love and “the one” kept stopping her from acting. It

was old fashioned and silly and thousands of other women may have waited but Eloise also wondered "what if?"

Arrow licked each nipple. "No, we don't. I am immortal. I cannot reproduce.

"How do you know that?" Was this some convenient male excuse to avoid a thin film of rubber?

"Like any vampire born of from the union of a mortal and a vampire, it is genetically impossible. And before you ask, I am also immune to mortal diseases. You are safe with me."

She looked in his eyes and knew he spoke the truth.

"Do you want me?" His voice was gentle yet possessive with need.

"Yes." Eloise craved the touch of another as she had never before. She had never felt so alive. It was because of him.

Arrow stroked her nipples. "Do you need me?"

Eloise stilled her hands. "Do *you* need me?"

"Yes." The word was ground out. The man was on edge and raw honesty was the only answer.

There were so many reasons why they should not be doing this. "This is a big mistake."

"Yes."

They both knew it. Neither was kidding the other. What they did now could affect their lives forever.

Eloise made her decision. This was always meant to happen and denying it was insane. "Do it."

Arrow took her face in his hands. "Are you sure?"

She lifted her legs to lock around his waist. "I need you." Until that moment Eloise had never needed anyone. If she did not have Arrow now, she knew it would be an even worse mistake and she would regret it forever.

He positioned himself so the head of his cock was at the wet core of her body. "This may hurt."

"You won't hurt me." How she knew that Eloise wasn't sure. She just did. "Do it Band-Aid fast."

Arrow hesitated. "What?" He looked at her in amusement.

"You know the quicker the less pain."

Arrow shook his head, his eyes tender on hers. "You are unlike any other woman I have known."

"I know." Eloise was smug in her response.

"Who's arrogant now?"

"You want me." It was as simple as that. Need beat out everything else at that moment.

"Yes I do." And then Arrow thrust inside her body.

The force of his penetration made Eloise suck in her breath. It was so hot and hard and amazingly right. She had never believed in the whole soul-mate thing until now. She was meant for Arrow. If there was pain it was fleeting and overcome by the feeling of him driving up right into the heart of her body.

"Okay?" He stilled for a moment as if waiting for permission to move.

"Oh yes." Eloise had never felt more okay in her life. As Arrow began pushing and pulling his cock back and forward inside her body in a slow, rocking motion, she closed her eyes and held on tight. "Bloody hell." In her wildest dreams she never imagined sex could be like this. Had they ever been strangers? *I have been waiting for you forever.*

Arrow stopped for a moment. "Is 'bloody hell' good or bad?"

"Good, very good." She ran her hands down to the taut flesh of his ass. "Don't stop." Eloise needed to feel every hot inch of him inside her. "Oh," she murmured as she opened her eyes and focused on him as she gave in to the new sensations ricocheting through her body. A chain reaction had started that she did not want to end.

Arrow laughed in delight as he continued. "You like?"

Eloise felt it almost impossible not to smile at him. He was gorgeous and hers. "You're not so bad, fang face."

"You're pretty okay too, shorty." Arrow's mouth found her and he kissed her until she was breathless. "I need—"

Why did he look so uncertain? "What?" Was there more? Could anything compete with this?

"Would you let me—"

The need in his eyes was mesmerizing. Eloise wanted to give him whatever he sought. She looked at his fangs. They were so white and sharp-looking yet she felt no threat. "You want to bite me?" The thought excited Eloise even more.

Arrow did not stop thrusting as he reached up and stroked her face with one hand. "I want to taste every inch of you."

"Will it hurt?"

"No."

Eloise believed him. "Yes, I want you to." There was such a need inside her to become completely his that denying him anything would be to deny herself.

"Thank you." Arrow's mouth moved to the base of her neck. He stilled within her for a moment as he punctured her vein in one fast move.

"Oh," Eloise whimpered, and stiffened slightly before a wild heat tore through her veins, making her body relax. A kaleidoscope of color competed with the blue of the sky, and for one crazy moment she felt as if only the two of them existed. His body and her body were one and their souls met and melded as his lips sucked on her neck. She cradled his head and gave in to the insistent tug of his mouth on her flesh.

When Arrow's mouth left her neck, there was no blood. Only a small wound of possession. "You are so beautiful." He kissed her and he became faster with each thrust of his cock.

Eloise tasted her own blood in her mouth. It was like nothing she could have ever imagined. She was not shocked. It turned her on even more as she panted and held on to his strong frame. The feeling that was tearing through her body demanded nothing less than her total surrender. As she came, screaming in his arms, the birds shrieked once more and the kaleidoscope of color disappeared.

"Oh I hate you," Eloise murmured against his mouth. Now she understood how a man could ruin a woman for all other men. There would never be anyone like Arrow. She felt his cock jerk hard as he shot his essence hot and high within her.

Arrow collapsed in her arms, gathering her close to him. "And I hate you back with a passion."

Chapter Three

Eloise had gone straight home after he had spun them back into the alley from where it all started. Neither said much. They had merely nodded and walked away. It was confusion on her part, but what of him? What did Arrow feel? Eloise knew the plan was to have sex and walk away. *But why do I feel so empty and lost?* The long, hot shower she'd indulged in had soothed her body but not her restless mind.

When she pushed through the door to Voodoo You, the store where she worked, Eloise's knees were still shaking. And she was hot. So hot. It was as if an unquenchable fire had been lit inside her and it was never going to be put out.

"What happened?" Mesopia Brilliant, her boss and owner of the New Age-cum-occult store, looked at her with interest.

Eloise went around behind the counter and deposited her purse under it. She looked inside a box of stock and tried to act as if it were any other workday. "Nothing happened." *Work, don't think about him.*

"Bullshit."

Mesopia was one of the few people who could carry off multi-facial piercings while still looking incredibly attractive. But Eloise suspected that had more to do with the spirit and verve for life that her raven-haired friend projected rather than outward appearance. Not many people could wear nearly twenty face piercings and still look beautiful. Ears, eyebrows, tongue and lip were all decorated. Eloise only had her ears pierced and some days she knew she looked like crap. But Mesopia was someone who made other people feel good just by being around her. She was also too astute for Eloise's liking.

"You're glowing."

Damn. Eloise could feel that glowing bit herself. She had never felt so alive. All her nerve endings were humming. Her hands stroked the bite mark he'd left. It tingled.

"What?" Mesopia moved over and looked at her.

"I screwed the vampire." Eloise pulled out one of the small glass bottles from the box.

"Wow! The *one*? This is huge!" Mesopia's eyes were wide in wonder.

"Yeah him." Eloise looked down at what she held in her hands. "What the hell is this?" Through the glass it appeared to be mucous.

"Tibetan yak spit."

"Eeww." Eloise dropped it back into the box.

"It's a huge seller. Good for everything for wart removal to impotence." Mesopia pushed the box away from the other woman. "Oh this so romantic."

"Yak spit?" Eloise sighed. She knew what her boss and friend referred to. She had long ago told Mesopia the whole story. "And no, it's not romantic because I am now stuck with fang face for eternity. Even though we both kid ourselves we're not, we are. We're stupid."

“Oh that’s sweet. You have nicknames already.” Mesopia leaned on the counter and looked at Eloise with interest. “What does he call you?”

“Shorty.”

“Oh I like it. Anyone can be called ‘darling’ or ‘honey’.” She nudged her friend. “So it was pretty powerful, huh? That’s a helluva love bite.”

As first-time-ever sex went, it was fantastic. She had heard it could be less than good. If Arrow could top that, then she would never leave his side. *What the hell am I thinking? Never leave his side?* “The whole worlds-colliding thing happened.” Eloise knew there was no way she would ever be the same again. It had shaken her carefully defined life and left it in a delightful mess. But still a mess. “What do I do? You’re the high priestess of all things weird.” There had to be a spell or a potion to save her.

Mesopia shook her head. “You know you’re screwed. No one can change that. It’s your fate.” She looked at Eloise in wonder. “It’s amazing to think after all these centuries that Cairtriona’s words came true.”

“Damn bitch.” The whole two being united into one was certainly physically doable and most enjoyable, but having to be stuck with one another until the end of time was the kicker. “When does time officially end?”

“I can look it up.” Mesopia stood up straight. “I have a book on that somewhere.” The bell above the door sounded and they both looked up.

“Oh bugger.” It was him.

Mesopia licked her lips. “Yummy.”

“Good evening,” Arrow greeted them in his best Count Dracula impersonation.

“Oh what are you doing here?” Eloise stood bolt upright and alert at the counter.

As he walked over to her, Arrow’s glance flitted from one shelf to another. The small shop had shelves filled with bottles, jars and weird little knickknacks. There was stuff in labeled bottles that he had not seen in three hundred years. His hand slid over a skeleton and came to rest over the white-knuckled grip Eloise had on her hands. Arrow felt her jump as they touched. He was glad to see he was not the only one affected by what had happened between them. He had held off as long as he could from coming to find her. It had not been hard to locate her. Since touching and tasting her, Arrow had become acutely sensitive to all things Eloise. He only had to think of her to know where she was. That Eloise worked in an occult shop did not surprise Arrow. It just seemed to fit her personality.

“I came to see if you were okay.” He steadied her as she stumbled, her hands latching on to his arm for support. “Still a bit wobbly in the legs?” Arrow knew this woman was trouble and he should not have done what he did but, damn it, he felt fantastic and he wanted more. He wanted to teach the delightful Eloise all about sex. Arrow had a feeling she would be an excellent student. She looked amazing in tight black leggings and a black and red t-shirt with classic punk band *The Clash* emblazoned on the front. He felt a strange, primal pleasure on seeing the mark on her neck. No makeup or escaping hair could hide that. Of course she was not the first woman he had taken in that way, but Eloise was the only one he felt all his primitive masculine needs completely attuned to, and as strange as that was, he liked the feeling.

“I’m swell. Now go. I mean it, fang face.”

She didn’t sound as if she did and Arrow loved it when she called him fang face. It was sexy and quirky and completely Eloise. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“You have a death grip on my arm.” Her hands sprang off immediately. “I was thinking, shorty—”

Eloise held up her hands “No, don’t tell me. Look where thinking got us last time.”

“I don’t see why we can’t enjoy the benefits of what we have without getting all tangled up in the emotional side of things.”

The other woman nodded. “Sounds excellent to me.” She held out her hand to him and introduced herself. “Mesopia Brilliant and you are simply gorgeous.”

Arrow smiled and kissed it her hand. He had been so consumed with looking at Eloise he had missed the exotic-looking redhead. “Great beauty abounds.”

Eloise rolled her eyes. “Look, we did the deed. It was nice—”

“Nice?” Arrow and Mesopia said at the same time.

“Yes but we both agreed it was a one-off.”

Arrow could see Eloise was trying very hard to remain unaffected by him. He planned to affect the hell out of her. “I lied. I’m a vampire. We do that.”

“Ooh I like you,” Mesopia murmured in approval.

Arrow was so laid back, sexy and arrogant that Eloise wanted to kiss him and slap him at the same time. It was all so confusing. It was right and wrong and everything in between.

Come on, what do you have to lose that you haven't already?" Arrow looked at her significantly. "I want to show you some other stuff I can do."

"You are so tacky." Yet he was utterly fascinating and she was completely drawn to him against all logic and willpower.

"Yeah, but you like me, shorty."

Eloise did and that was the problem. Before meeting him, she had built him into an evil monster who she would be pinned to for life. But reality was quite different and charming, albeit arrogant.

"Go on." Mesopia pushed her shoulder. "Take the day off and get to know the hubby. Check out his stuff." She looked the man in question up and down. "I wouldn't mind taking a peek myself."

Eloise stamped her foot. "He is not my husband."

"Cute." Arrow held out his hand to her. "Scared you won't be able to control yourself, shorty?"

Yes, that was it exactly. Already she wanted to throw herself against him and damn Caitriona and whatever the consequences.

"I feel it too." Arrow pulled her toward him.

"I can ignore it." *Sort of.*

"Okay, so let's spend time together ignoring each other."

A huge part of her wanted to go wherever he led and Eloise was not a follower by nature. "You're not going to spin me out of here?"

Arrow pulled her into his arms. "Oh yeah."

* * * * *

The water splashed over the sides of the big old-fashioned bathtub as they landed in it.

"How the hell did I get naked?" She looked at her breasts covered with foam. Her eyes strayed to the head of Arrow's penis, pushing up through the scented water.

"One advantage to spinning a woman is stripping her when she is too dazzled to think clearly." Arrow moved through the water to her.

"You have fast hands." The bath could have easily fitted four people, yet with a naked Arrow coming at her with a determined look in his eyes, it seemed too small. Eloise moved back and hit the side. "Where are we?"

"A harem."

"A what?" Eloise sat up and looked around her in shock. The ornate tiles and beautiful surroundings had almost passed by her. "Someone will see us."

"Nah, they're all off doing their own thing." Arrow was not the slightest bit perturbed. "Besides I have contacts who do as I bid at a moment's notice. So?"

"So?" Eloise felt his hands part her legs under the water. "Um look, I think—" And then Arrow kissed her and she had no idea what she was thinking or doing because she found herself naturally gravitating onto his lap. The cock against her stomach was a wake-up call though. She pushed back from him and licked her lips. *God he tasted good.* "Wait, wait."

Arrow's hands reached to pull her forward. "Why? I need you and you need me."

"I don't need anyone let alone you."

"Liar."

"Am not." Arrow just smiled, and before she could speak, he fastened his mouth on one of her nipples and sucked hard. Eloise choked back the shriek that came to her lips. She was sure she was not the first one to have sex in this tub, but Eloise had no intention of attracting onlookers. She wanted to push him away yet also hold him there. It was all so confusing. His hands between her legs, massaging her clit in a slow, lazy circle did not make trying to decide what she should do any easier, nor did his cock insistently thrumming against her inner thigh seeking entry. When Arrow switched to her other nipple, Eloise groaned and threaded the fingers of one hand through his hair, holding him close. With the other she grabbed his cock and stroked it. If someone had told her two days ago she would be touching a man like this she would have thought them stoned.

Arrow pushed her hand from his penis. "No."

"What?" Eloise wanted to touch someone and that was a first for her.

He moved back to the other side of the tub. "You heard me."

"Why?" Eloise fell from his lap, completely at a loss. First the big rush and now he backed off. What was that about? "Don't you want me?"

"Yes I do." Arrow started stroking his own cock, the water barely concealing the length.

The sight was mesmerizing to her. "Am I missing something?"

"Yes." The one word was said so simply.

Except Eloise had no idea what it was. "What?"

"Think about it." Arrow's hand kept moving up and down his shaft.

"I don't want to think." She wanted heat between her thighs now.

Arrow laughed and fingered the head of his penis. "What do you need?"

"You know." Lord, she blushing. He made her feel suddenly shy. This whole soul-mates thing was complicated. One moment she knew everything and the next, she didn't have a clue.

"Tell me. Say, 'I need you, Arrow'."

Eloise snorted. In a pig's ear she would. *Arrogant sod*. "But I don't. I'm not the one who is desperate here." *Sort of*.

"Aren't you?"

She gulped as she watched Arrow pull on his cock harder. "No, and don't do that."

"Why?" Arrow continued on, slowing somewhat.

"It's a waste."

"So?"

Perverse man. "Stop it."

"Make me."

There was every reason not to do as Arrow bade, yet she needed to feel him inside her once more and sitting on the other side of the tub was not going to get her there. Eloise moved over to him and pulled at his hands. They remained firm.

"Tell me what you need, shorty."

"I want—"

"No, want is different from need. *Want* is primal desire," Arrow told her, his eyes locked on hers. "*Need* is because only one person can ever fulfill what you want." He pushed her hands away and rested his own along the edge of the tub behind him.

"Talk about splitting hairs." Eloise knew she was pouting but, damn it, she was entitled to. The man got her all hot and bothered then he backed away. "You are such a bastard."

Arrow laughed at her words. "You are not the first person to tell me that. Now tell me something else."

There were two ways this was going to go. One. No sex and she would be very pissed off because after that first time, she really wanted to do it again. Or two. She admitted that she needed him. Eloise did. She had just never said it to anyone. It came down to sex verses pride. She blew out a breath. Pride wasn't going to get the man inside her. "Fine, have it your way. I need you, fang face."

He smiled. "That's close enough. Come here and hop onboard, shorty."

The length of his shaft was daunting, and while it had been inside her once before, he had done the work getting it there. She licked her lips as she surveyed the object in question.

"It's doable, trust me."

"I know." Eloise climbed onto his lap once more and took hold of his penis. She raised herself on her knees and aimed the head of his cock at her vagina. As Eloise slowly sank down over its heated length, she smiled. This was what she needed. Arrow filled the empty space inside her so nicely.

"You are so beautiful." His hands went to her hips.

"And you are arrogant." Eloise started to rock back and forth on top of him, amazed at the natural rhythm that caught at her. "Are you always so sure of yourself, fang face?"

"Aren't you?"

"I used to be until you came along."

"Need is a good thing, shorty." Arrow cocked his head to the side. "Uh-oh."

Eloise heard the same sound. "I thought you said we would be alone?"

"I was wrong." He started moving her faster on his thighs.

She was close to coming but not in front of an audience. "Spin us out of here." His pelvic bone was hitting her clit and she was on the point of exploding.

"Here's the thing with the male anatomy. When my cock is engaged, all blood flow and thoughts are on that. I can't spin us anywhere."

Eloise moved faster, matching the pace dictated by his hands and bouncing on top of him. "If we get caught you're in big trouble."

"What will you do to me?"

"Just shut up and fuck me." Eloise moaned as the orgasm hit. It was fantastic and worth screaming her lungs out for but for the situation they were in. Instead she dropped her mouth against Arrow's shoulder to muffle the sound.

"I love having sex with you," he chuckled as he thrust up hard inside her and came.

The door opened. A male voice said, "What the—"

Eloise lifted up and off his shaft. She threw herself against Arrow's body and held on tightly. "Spin us the hell out of here."

Arrow's arms caught her up. "Yes ma'am."

Chapter Four

"Sorry about that." Arrow and Eloise landed in a wet, naked heap on her living room floor.

Eloise accepted his hand to stand up. "You don't look sorry." In fact he looked nothing but pleased.

Arrow held up his hands in mock surrender. "Okay I'm not but it was fun. Now show me the bedroom."

Eloise had not expected to be spun to her own home but she noticed that Arrow was anything but a planner. He did what he wanted when he wanted. That she was caught up in this madness was unlike her. Normally Eloise only did what she wanted to do. But then none of this was normal. That he even knew where she lived was a surprise. But Arrow had just said that he could "feel" where she needed to be.

"Why?" It was a bedroom with a bed, thus fairly obvious what Arrow's plan was but still she felt the need to have some vague control of her life at that moment.

Arrow nudged her hip with his. "You know why."

"I'm not having sex with you again." And how real was this sex, anyway? Arrow spun her off to a romantic destination and made love to her. Would it be any different if the smoke-and-mirrors illusion wasn't there? What did she actually mean to him? Eloise stiffened at her thoughts. What was wrong with her? She went from not wanting to have him anywhere in her life to wondering what place she had in his. Other than sex, of course. And *why am I naked and not uncomfortable?* She grabbed her old robe from where she had flung it on the sofa when she had left home earlier. Thank God for being messy. She put it on, tightening the belt and wondering what next with the vampire.

"What?" He stopped and looked at her.

"Nothing." It was crazy to think this was anything more than sex. Yes, the curse part had been fulfilled, but it mentioned nothing about love or commitment. As for soul mates and the idea of eternity, Eloise believed that to be greeting card philosophy sold to the masses. Sex was not always love, and she sure as hell did not want to spend eternity with a man she did not understand. Eloise blew out a sigh. She felt rattled. So much had happened in such a short time. "And put some clothes on."

"Does my being naked bother you, shorty?" Arrow was amused.

She had never felt so short in her life. "Yes." How could a woman think straight with all that going on?

"Good. So tell me what's on your mind? I can see the gears shifting in your head."

"What do you want from me?"

Arrow smiled. "That's a loaded question, Ms. Gaunt. For the moment I need to protect you. I need to see the whole house, your bedroom included." He gave her a gentle shove to get her moving. "Do you remember the rest of the curse? You know the bit about becoming one but disturbing the ghost of Caitriona?"

Eloise had been so caught up in the sex-and-eternity thing that she had not thought about the rest of it. She had forgotten about the tests. How pissed off had that lady been a thousand years ago? Surely her ancestress was not going to hurt her? But then how could she know for sure? "Oh fuck."

"As soon as I check out the house," Arrow promised.

Eloise moved around, pointing out rooms to him. "I never understood why Caitriona had the whole curse thing going and then added the loophole about her having to be happy that the cursed couple would stay together to appease her restless spirit." It was a big thing to ask.

"All women like a loophole," Arrow responded. He heard her snort at his words. "Oh come on, you're all the same. You'll do this or make sure you have an out if things get tough."

"Gee, you have quite the silver tongue. I am stunned no woman has snapped you up before, fang face."

Arrow took her hand in his. "Because it was always you." The sudden silence that fell between them was deafening. They were essentially two strangers thrown together because fate and a cranky woman had decreed it to be so. "So the Caitriona curse is we are forced together and then she tries to pull us

apart to test our bond. It's sort of like we run the gauntlet." He raised his eyebrows in mirth. "Get it? You're a Gaunt. A Gaunt-let if you like."

Eloise rolled her eyes. "You're hysterical. Not. Anyway a *gauntlet* is a glove. A *gantlet* is a test of endurance and, all things considered, I would rather deal with a glove." She didn't want to take part in some endurance test. She had more than enough challenges in her life.

They had stopped in her sunroom near the front door.

"I know."

She sighed. "So this is all about seeing how strong our bond is." *And why am I thinking bond? I scarcely know the man, er, vampire.* When did this stop being a one-off to get him out of her system?

"Yes, we have seven tests to thwart her or we die because of our lack of faith in the other."

The firm, warm pressure of his hand was making other parts of her body warm and contemplating other "firm" things. "Why are these bloody legends always seven? Seven deadly sins, the seventh sign, the seventh daughter—what's with that? Why can't it be one sin, sign and daughter?"

"We will be okay, shorty."

When she looked in his clear blue eyes, Eloise wanted to believe him. "Caitriona had to be premenstrual when she came up with that." Only a hormonal woman could come out with such an annoying, pissy clause.

"My understanding is that she was once thwarted in love by a vampire. He spurned her for another. Before she died, Caitriona declared in one thousand years another Gaunt would fall for one and renew her soul if they could pass her seven challenges. I believe test number one was in the bathtub when you admitted you needed me."

"Well, you needed me too."

"Yes, and being strong enough to admit to need is a challenge."

Not only did she have the eternity thing going on but she also had to run a gantlet. Until now Eloise had conveniently forgotten that whole testing part because she had been determined not to meet up with a vampire. She looked Arrow up and down. "Why Arrow?"

"Why Eloise?"

Valid point. A name was just a name, but she had to wonder how straight and true an arrow he was. "So how old are you?" Madam Cherylene had told her he was an ancient one. Of course "ancient" to Madam Cherylene would probably be a two-week-old television guide.

"Seven hundred years."

Eloise staggered against him. "Wow. So you would never have known Caitriona." It was hard to fathom beings so old.

Arrow wrapped an arm around her waist to steady her. "No. She was three hundred years before my time."

Seven hundred years. That was a long time. She was thirty-two and sometimes that seemed as if it dragged. "Have you always been alone?" Did they have that in common? Did Arrow know what it felt like to need someone? *Damn, it is hard to concentrate with hard male flesh pressing into me.*

"Why? You worried about me, shorty?"

"No." What was it like to live that long and see people he liked or even loved die?

"There have been many women but not the one." He saw Eloise's mouth drop open in surprise. "And yes, you are and I don't mind it as much as I thought I would. You have a certain innocent yet feisty appeal I like." He hooked his leg around hers, catching her off balance and lowering her to the carpet.

Her robe was removed before she could think. "Fang face, I—" His fingers on her lips stilled her words.

"I want you anytime, anywhere and this is more than just fantasy."

"Are you a mind reader?" How did he understand her when she was couldn't understand herself at times?

"No," he murmured as he moved between her legs. "I'm just getting to understand you and how you think." Arrow's teeth grazed her breasts.

As sharp as his fangs looked, he was gentle with them on her skin. "It's not even been twenty-four hours." Her hands moved up to his shoulders. Eloise wanted him. It was as simple as that. He only had to look at her and she was wet with need.

"So?" Arrow's tongue lapped at her flesh.

Eloise squirmed at the sensation. "Well, you know."

Even though he had only just met Eloise, Arrow felt as if he had known her forever. She was scared of the situation they were in. There were a lot of unknowns and, even as an immortal being, Arrow wasn't exactly certain what was going on. But unlike Eloise, for him that did not matter. He did not fear the unknown. After seven hundred years, it was too much a part of him to worry about. He lifted his head and looked down at her.

"Do I frighten you?" That was something Arrow did not want. Having Eloise with him, in his arms, made him feel more powerful than he had in centuries. He had an inkling what that meant, but he wasn't about to admit it to himself for only mortals fell in love.

“No.”

Arrow sighed in relief.

“You’re scary but not frightening,” she added.

Ah, the complicated mind of Eloise Gaunt. “Is there a difference?” He wanted to know. In fact, Arrow needed to know everything she believed in, what she loved and what she hated. Eloise fascinated Arrow. He felt he would never tire of her and not many women had held his interest past the bedroom.

“You’re, well, more daunting than outright terrifying.”

Arrow threw back his head and laughed out loud. This was what he needed. Someone to laugh with. Over the centuries he has been amused but not really happy. He stopped and thought about that. *Damn, I am happy and it’s because of her.* That Eloise could admit her fears to him made him want to make her happy in any way he could.

“You have to stop fighting this.” Their meeting was inevitable. What they shared right now was amazing. Arrow was more than happy to let tomorrow take care of itself. He had Eloise to look after.

“It’s just—”

“Too good to be true?” Arrow felt the same way. To meet someone and bond so quickly was either a gift of new life or a cruel joke if they could not be together. *But I know we will be.*

Eloise sighed. “Yes. I mean no. I don’t know.”

The look she gave him was so confused and yet trusting that Arrow wanted to do whatever he could to help her relax. Although her body melded so beautifully to his, Arrow could feel the tension within.

“I have no idea what will happen next, shorty. This may all fall apart and we may never see each other again. But I like you. I like you a lot and I believe you feel the same way. And yes, the sex is excellent and that doesn’t always happen straightaway.” And it had for them. The answer was compatibility. And while there were moments when Arrow doubted the cosmos knew what it was doing or that the mumblings of a long-dead woman were relevant, he did believe that whoever pushed them together was right in their actions. “So let’s enjoy what we have for as long as we have it.” Arrow felt her body relax under his.

“I really hate you.”

“Yeah, me too.” In fact he loved the way Eloise hated him. “Turn over.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask so many questions,” Arrow told her though he actually liked that she queried everything. It was a sign of intelligence he admired. Arrow helped her roll over and up onto her hands and knees.

“This is not my best angle.” She tried to drop back down to cover herself.

Arrow caressed her ass. “I beg to differ.” He adored her body, every full and luscious curve. Too many women starved themselves for what they thought men liked. What men wanted was a real woman to hold on to, cellulite and all.

“Don’t do that.”

Eloise’s shiver shot up his arm. He liked that she had trouble with being in control around him. “Do what?” Arrow’s hand moved down between the globes of flesh.

“T-that,” she stammered.

Arrow slapped her butt playfully. “I plan to do that and much more.” He pulled her legs apart, her pink inner flesh on display. He moved in and touched his tongue to her clit. The shriek Eloise let loose charmed him. It had been a long time since he had tasted a woman so innocent and yet so willing to express her pleasure. This was not just sex. This was more. *But I will not name it yet.* Arrow continued to tongue her, loving the way her hips rocked back and forth against him and the taste of her.

“Oh…” Eloise groaned as she pushed back for more.

“Do you feel like you want to explode?” He tongued the folds of her pussy ruthlessly.

“Yes.” The word came out as part whisper, part sob of need.

“And?” Arrow pulled back from her. He needed to know he was not the only one consumed by the wildfire between them.

“I need you.” She craned her head around. “Happy, fang face?”

“Yes, I am happy.” Some defeats were sweet and meant to be. That Eloise needed him humbled him as much as it heartened him. Arrow prodded her butt with his cock. He smiled when she pushed back against him eagerly.

“You want me now?” If Eloise said no Arrow knew he would not be able to cope. No woman had affected him so.

“You owe me for the rushed moment back in the harem.”

The aggravated tone of her voice made him smile. “I thought I just repaid you.”

“I want more.”

“Excellent.” His first thrust into her from behind made them both sigh. It was a joint need met and matched.

“Why did I never do any of this before?” Eloise moaned as she met him thrust for thrust.

The thought that another had or would touch her like this again appalled Arrow. That was unusual. “Because you never had me.” The sound of his balls slapping against her ass made him plunge harder within her. Arrow wanted to be as unforgettable to Eloise as she was rapidly becoming to him.

“You’re so cocky.”

“You should know.” Eloise was filled to the hilt with him. Arrow told himself to go slowly and that all this was still new to Eloise, but damned if he could when his cock was gripped so tightly within her. When she arched her back in delight, he could feel the spasms of pleasure rip through her body. That he had done that to her made him come wildly inside her. There would always be time for more later. Now was all about claiming each other.

After they calmed down, he removed his spent cock and rolled her so they lay on the carpet in each other’s arms.

“Bite me,” Eloise murmured as she looked into Arrow’s eyes.

It was then, by that invitation, that he knew he loved her. As his fangs once more pierced her flesh and the sweet blood flowed, he accepted as fact that there was no power on Earth that he would not fight to keep this woman by his side.

Chapter Five

“Do you hear moaning?” Eloise was comforted by the warmth and safety of Arrow’s arms. He had rolled her on top of him. She lifted her head and looked into his eyes. “There it is again.” It was a low, keening sound that echoed with sadness.

“I thought that was you so overcome with passion for me.”

Eloise slapped his chest. The things she had done with him made her hot all over. “I think it’s Caitriona.” The sound was lonely and wild and not quite of this world. As if in confirmation, the floor started to shake beneath them and pictures crashed down from the walls.

Arrow rolled them around so his back deflected any blows. “Don’t move.”

“That’s unlikely. You weigh a ton.” The walls shook and ornaments were falling and smashing into pieces around them. “Holy crap,” Eloise cried out as the curtain rails crashed down.

“Caitriona is testing us.”

“By breaking my stuff? I want to kick her ghostly ass.” She winced as the light fitting fell and bounced off Arrow’s broad back. “That had to hurt.”

“I’m okay.” Arrow held her close. “She needs us to remain united.”

“She needs?”

“This is as much about her faith in us as ours in each other. If we can do this and she can rest in peace I say we do it.”

“You *are* a romantic, fang face.” As quickly as it started, the crashing stopped. “That was pretty amateur.” Eloise’s words sounded braver than she felt.

“Caitriona’s just starting.”

“So we have five more goes at running Caitriona’s gantlet.”

“Looks that way.”

The doorbell sounded. They were on the other side of the wooden door. Eloise stifled the sudden giggle that came to her lips. They were naked and entwined on one side and someone was on the other.

“Who is it?” she called as she pushed Arrow’s mouth away from her breasts.

“Delivery for Eloise Gaunt,” a voice called back.

“Just leave it on the step please.” She was hardly dressed to receive anything at that moment other than the hot cock that was stirring between her legs once more.

“Okay, ma’am.”

Eloise looked affronted. “He ma’amed me. I’m not old enough to be a ma’am.”

Arrow laughed and moved from her body and stood. He held out his hand and pulled her to her feet.

Eloise stepped back as he opened the door and picked up the box. He was completely oblivious to his nudity. She doubted her neighbors would be. Eloise looked at the prettily wrapped parcel. It was velvety red with a plush red bow. “Ooh pretty.” She eagerly took it from Arrow. No one had ever sent her anything like this before.

“Be careful,” Arrow warned, looking at the package in concern.

“Oh please, you just flashed my neighbors with full frontal nudity. I’m more careful than you.” Eloise lifted the lid and burrowed through the crisp pink tissue paper. What was below confused her. It looked like chocolate spiders. Who would send her this? “What the—”

Arrow slapped the box from her hand but it was too late. The spiders, which were real, not chocolate, sprang to life and ran all her over her naked body.

Eloise screamed. “Get them off me!” She started thrashing around, trying to slap them off her skin.

Arrow grabbed her. “Stand still.”

“Fuck off, they’re not on you,” Eloise shrieked at him. She was headed for full-on panic and any calm she had was gone.

“Panic makes ’em worse.” He made her stand still.

Dozens of spider legs ran over her skin and in places she did not want to contemplate. “Oh this is icky.” She clutched at Arrow’s shoulders as he started systematically picking them off her and crushing them under his foot.

“Icky?” He was amused by the word.

“Ooky then.” How on earth had Caitriona done this?

“Your ancestress must have some mind control,” Arrow murmured almost as if reading her mind. “That tells me she had and still has great power.”

Eloise had never thought that deeply about Caitriona. She had always been an inconvenience. “Whatever. Just get them off me.”

“Be patient.” He was moving fast without panicking.

Eloise scoffed and tried to refrain from jumping around too much. “I’m never patient.”

Arrow chuckled as I continued his task. “I had noticed that. This is a hell of a test, huh?”

“Okay, so this would be a test about patience.” She understood that now but that was not to say she liked it.

“It’s a virtue. And that you trust me to help you.”

“I would let a psychotic axe murder pluck spiders from me now.

“Liar.” Arrow nearly had all the spiders removed.

“Whatever.” As the last one came off and was crushed underfoot, she sighed in relief. “Now I’m going to have to clean up dead spider bodies along with everything else.” Her sunroom was a mess. Knickknacks and paintings were scattered on the floor. Eloise blew out a sigh. “Like I haven’t got enough going on in my life at the moment.” Even as she said the words the bodies in question disappeared before her eyes. *Whoa!* “Did you see that?”

Arrow nodded and pulled her into his arms. “Caitriona.”

Eloise slumped against his body, surprised at how much she needed him not just physically but emotionally. “I can’t do this another four more times.”

“Yeah you can.”

He had more faith than she. That was weird, considering he was the vampire. The so called “dark one”.

“So we stick together to make this ancestress of mine happy.”

“Yes.”

And then what? They part ways? After all there was no commitment here. It was sex and a task to succeed at. Arrow had never mentioned anything more permanent. Eloise looked into his eyes. *I want permanent.* The thought both shocked and thrilled her.

“Let’s take it one day at a time, shorty,” he said as if guessing her thoughts.

* * * * *

Eloise had just placed the last price-tagged bottle of Tibetan yak spit on a shelf beside the Oil of Goat’s Nuts and the fingers of cinnamon-flavored seaweed sticks when Arrow appeared. Of course she knew he would. He was the persistent type. Eloise had managed to avoid him that night after the spider incident. She had simply explained that she needed space.

“And I’m kind of sore from…well…you know.” Arrow knew and his simple okay had been sweet, but she knew he would not leave her that easily next time. Nor did she want him to. *I just know I am going to hell*. How did she deal with avoiding someone only to turn around and then want them? And a vampire no less. It was wrong on so many moral and ethical levels. But then Eloise had never been one to worry about stuff like that. Consequences happened. Of course the consequences had never been so big or so life changing before. Eloise wondered what Uncle McManus would say if he were alive now.

There was only one other person in the store at that moment. That was Swerve and he was a regular. Eloise was pleased to see that although Swerve

was, as always, stoned, at least he was fully dressed. The red-haired Swerve had a thing about clothing. He preferred to be naked. He usually walked into the store, removed his clothes and left them on the counter. "Clothes wreck the natural karma flow, man. I need to feel the peaceful vibes of your store." While Eloise was all for flowing karma and peace, there were enough odd things in the store without a bouncing cock to worry about, as well. But the thing was, Swerve was completely harmless in that dopey, sweet way. Eloise suspected he was also very smart because sometimes he came out with the most amazing information about the products they sold. Swerve had already bought two bottles of Tibetan yak spit. When Eloise asked why, he had simply tapped his nose and smiled at her. "This will save the world one day."

"Okay then," she had murmured, and rung up the purchases. It was not for her to wonder why people bought the stuff they did.

Eloise looked at Arrow. Damn he was gorgeous. *And he is mine—well, at least for the moment.*

"How do you feel, shorty?"

If anyone else persisted in calling her shorty she would have been angry, but Arrow made it sound special. *Or maybe I'm just getting too caught up in this whole thing with him and damn Caitriona.*

"I have to work. It's how I pay the bills. You vampires would not know about stuff like that." Her words came out harder than she wanted them to. If Arrow took offense in them he did not show it.

"What the hell do you live off? Fresh air?"

"As I can move through space, I can collect the things I need without anyone noticing."

"Hey, man." Swerve gravitated over to Arrow almost as if kindred souls in weirdness recognized each other.

Eloise introduced the two men and watched as they performed some strange handshake-male-bonding thing. It looked complicated and yet natural as if it were something like a club handshake.

"Narley teeth. Are they real?" Swerve moved in closer as Arrow bared his fangs fully for him to see.

"Yeah." Arrow was amused.

"Cool. I gotta get me a set of those." Swerve looked around the store as if expecting to see them.

Arrow pointed to the far corner. "I think there are some on a shelf over there."

Eloise shook her head. "We don't sell teeth." Swerve drifted off as Swerve did, stoned yet steady on his feet. He had the grace of a stoned ballerina.

"He's on another planet. He'll forget about them by the time he gets over there." Arrow went around the cash register to stand beside her. "Ever had sex on the counter? No, of course you haven't." He looked pretty cocky in that knowledge. "Want to do it now?"

Eloise backed away from him. Yes. "I have customers." She was working. She had to focus on that and not him.

"One customer and close the store."

"I can't." Well, she could. Their rush hour was when the kids came in from school and spent their money on weird things to frighten each other with. They all wanted to be Harry Potter.

"Swerve will be fine." They both looked at the man who had made it to the far corner but was now staring at an assortment of plastic skulls. "Are you okay there, brother, while I sort out my lady?"

"Yeah, man." Swerve nodded, never turning from the skulls. "I need to talk to these dudes for a while and I appreciate the privacy."

Eloise shook his head. Only Swerve would need to converse with plastic skulls. "You know his girlfriend is completely normal."

"They usually are." Arrow made short work of locking up and then took her hand and led her into the back of the store.

"Where are taking me?" Eloise knew she had the power to say no and Arrow would stop. The thing was, she just did not have the ability to.

"To heaven and beyond."

She snorted. "Pretty sure of your skills there, fang face." Eloise had to admit she found that kind of arrogance sexy.

"As are you."

"You know I still hate you." Eloise hated him so much there were times when she was so overcome by need that she forgot about what had brought them together.

"I love the way you hate."

They looked at each other. Love. The word had been thrown out there. Eloise felt her heart race when she saw the tender expression on Arrow's face. He looked as if he actually cared. Could he? Could she? What if? Eloise shook herself. It was crazy to get all worked up and hopeful over a word that was so commonly used. It was not like she were some airy-fairy dreamer who believed in cotton candy happy endings. Life was never like that.

"So." Back to being practical. Sex with the vampire was on offer. Maybe a more modest person would have said no. Maybe it was morally wrong to take what was on offer and expect nothing more. But Eloise wanted Arrow. If anyone got hurt in the end it would be her. She was woman enough to accept the consequences of her actions.

Arrow eyed her with interest. "What? I can see all sorts of thoughts in your eyes."

With any other man it would not have occurred to her to act as she did with him. "You bring me out here with the promise of something more and yet you offer me nothing?"

He smiled at her words. "You could always make the first move—unless you're scared to."

And that was the thing. Eloise wasn't scared with Arrow. Not anymore. He allowed her to do whatever she wanted and take whatever she needed without judgment. There was unbelievable freedom in that. "Am not."

"Prove it then."

Eloise was up to the challenge. Where to start and what would bring this man to his knees? A sudden thought came to her. *Hmm, could I do that?* It was bold and wild and something she had never contemplated before. She looked into his eyes. It would be fun to see him squirm. She pushed him back against the wall.

"Stand still." Her hands went to the buckle of her belt. As always being so close to Arrow was overwhelming. Eloise could not believe that this man was at her beck and call.

"Do as you will." He held his hands away from his body, his eyebrows arched as her hands started unbuckling his belt. "This is interesting."

"I might just want to see what color underwear you have on." Eloise pulled the zip down.

"I'm not wearing any." His cock sprang out eagerly.

"No you're not." Eloise pushed it aside and pulled his trousers down.

"You're playing with fire, shorty."

She dropped to her knees and continued to work the fabric down to his ankles. Eloise did not remove his boots. She wanted him immobile and unable to resist anything she chose to do to him. "This is my game and I'll play however I want." She looked up into his eyes. There was passion and tenderness. The need to have this man totally out of control for her was overwhelming. Eloise ran her hands up his legs to his muscled thighs. They were so firm and hard. She pushed his eager, bouncing cock away and leaned forward and tasted the skin of his muscled thighs. "Yum." She lapped at his flesh eagerly.

"Eloise." Arrow jumped as her mouth moved over his upper legs.

She smiled against his skin. He'd used her name. "Yes?" Her hands moved around to cup his butt.

"If you do what I think you're going to do I may scream."

"Come on, you're a big strong vampire." The thought of Arrow screaming was funny and yet sweet. He wasn't that tough and that he could admit it to her made Eloise feel he was not the only powerful one in this relationship. "Surely nothing gets to you." Her hand gravitated to his cock. It felt hard and full yet covered in soft, hot flesh. It was like one extreme to the other. Giving in to instinct and the need to please her man, Eloise licked the tip of his penis. Arrow jumped. She licked again. A long, low growl rumbled in his throat. "Hmm."

"What?" he choked out as his hands reached onto either side of the wall to hold himself still.

"You're not so scary, after all." She began tonguing his cock with determination. It was fun and exciting feeling Arrow jump impatiently beneath her mouth.

"I am weak for you."

As I am for you. Eloise slipped the head of his cock between her lips. It was like a salty, musk-flavored lollipop. Her enjoyment came from making the man above her squirm as she sucked with the intent of making him even wilder. And he was not the only one feeling this way. Eloise felt a corresponding rush of wetness between her legs. Power was indeed sexy and she was only just beginning to realize how much.

"Shorty?" Arrow's voice was hoarse and low as she licked from the base to the tip of his shaft. "Eloise?"

She looked up at him, her mouth still engaged in its task. When he gently pushed her lips away, his cock stood out all wet and shiny. Arrow's hands went to under her armpits and lifted her up.

"That it?" Eloise wanted to taste so much more with this plan. Ideas of licking his body from head to toe caught in her mind. "Can't handle any more, fang face?"

"Oh hell no." Before she could speak, Arrow turned her around to face the wall and lifted up her skirt. "You have to stop wearing these." He ripped her panties from her body and flung them aside.

Eloise closed her eyes and sighed as his hand found her clit. Whatever Arrow wanted to do to her she would allow.

"You're so wet. Did sucking me turn you on?" His fingers slid into her vagina.

"Yes." There was no point lying. Completely oblivious to the fact she was at work, Eloise pushed back onto his hand. "I need more." His fingers were good but his cock was better. She needed to feel the fullness of the wet, hard cock that prodded her ass inside her body. No sensation could compete with Arrow's hot body plastered tight against hers as he took her deep and fast.

"What do you need, shorty?" His fingers continued their slow, sensual motion.

"I need you inside me now."

"Or?"

She turned her head to the side. "What do you mean or? Is there another option? Your cock is pushing at my ass, begging for entry, so I know I am not the only one out of control here." She spread her legs wider, urging him inside.

Arrow laughed. "You're right. I need you more than anything I have ever needed before." He kissed her cheek and positioned her hips for entry. "And I love hearing you say you want me."

"Always," she murmured before she realized what "always" actually meant.

"That's a promise."

The first thrust almost lifted Eloise off her feet it was so deep and insistent. It was exactly what she craved, full possession and nothing less. "Oh yes," she moaned as her hands clawed at the wall. She was completely helpless to whatever he wanted to do and she liked it. Arrow's strokes were firm and unyielding as he pounded away inside her. There was no need for tenderness. This was all about fulfilling a need they both had. That each recognized this was the most important thing.

Eloise heard a soft moan of pleasure.

Arrow stopped for a moment. "That wasn't you, was it?"

No, she was more a screamer than a moaner. "Do you think someone is watching?" Her thoughts went back to Swerve over with the skulls. It would be embarrassing yet strangely arousing to have someone watch them make love. Whoa! Back up. *Make love?*

"It was a female." Arrow started pumping back inside her.

The sigh of pleasure once more sounded. "Caitriona?" Who else could it be? If it was Mesopia she would have stayed and watched and probably made suggestions. "Do you think this could be another test?" Arrow's balls were pounding into her ass and she knew it would not take long for her to come.

"Yeah I do. Do you know why?" His hands went to her breasts and molded them.

At that moment Eloise was incapable of speaking. Wild, fierce pleasure shot through her veins and she wanted to scream. Instead she bit her tongue and shook her head.

"Because you gave freely to me and took what you desired without fear." Arrow's mouth fastened on her neck.

Eloise welcomed the piercing pain that was over in a second. She now knew the sucking of his mouth on her flesh, as he fed on her blood, would intensify her orgasm. Eloise pushed back eagerly against Arrow, wanting to feel every inch of his skin on hers. She sighed as her whole body began to tingle. As the climax hit, the scream she had been holding on to came out and Eloise flopped limply against the wall and let Arrow do whatever he wanted to her sated body. She was his. Outwardly she could fight it but inside Eloise knew the truth. Arrow's body jerked against her, his hot seed shooting up inside her.

"Thank you," he murmured as he rested his body against hers.

It was at that moment Eloise knew she had fallen in love.

* * * * *

"I feel cosmic sex just happened here." Mesopia came into the store just as Arrow left. She smiled at the cynical look in Eloise's eyes. "Okay I saw his bare ass pistoning away as I came around the corner five minutes earlier." She jingled the keys in her hand. "Oh boy, he is hot." Mesopia fanned her face. "I was going to stay and watch but I thought decorum was the better part of valor. Besides I think you had other company. I heard a woman."

"Yeah, we think that was Caitriona." Eloise explained what Arrow thought.

"Not only is he hotter than hell but smart to boot." Mesopia looked impressed. "There's not many men like that around."

"You can have him." Now that Arrow had gone, Eloise was back to being all defensive again. *Why can't I do that when he is here?* And hot. She still burned from him. The fire he had lit within her was like a never-ending hunger.

"The vampire's not mine, more's the pity." Mesopia reached over to a nearby shelf of stock and handed Eloise a jar. "It's a lotion that will help with the marks on your neck. Mind you I would keep 'em. There's something sexy and possessive about a lover's mark."

Eloise read the contents of the jar. No mucous. *Okay then.*

"So what are you going to do?"

The woman in question blew out a breath. "Get through another three more tests."

Mesopia nodded. "Then what?"

"Then Caitriona is appeased and we go our separate ways." And that was what Eloise had to remember. Enjoy the sex but stick to the plan.

"Can you do that?" Mesopia looked doubtful on that score.

"I have to." Doubt abounded.

“Before you lose yourself completely?”

That was the question. “Yes.” The answer—Eloise was already lost.

“You love the vampire, don’t you?”

Eloise looked down at the lotion in her hands. “So this is good stuff, huh?” The idea that she loved Arrow was too raw and fresh to say out loud.

They were both silent for a while. “Do you know Swerve’s sleeping in the skull pile over there?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Okay then.”

Chapter Six

Eloise stiffened as she felt someone behind her. She turned but there was no one. “That’s weird. Oh what am I saying?” Eloise slapped her forehead, wishing she had taken the laundry peg out of her hand before she did. “I’m having sex with a vampire. Can’t get any weirder than that.” She rubbed her skin as she turned back to the washing machine. Doing something mundane like laundry was good at the moment. It gave her time to think of something other than Arrow. The man was constantly in her thoughts. “What the hell am I going to do with him?” she muttered to herself. “Why him?” Eloise stilled suddenly. There was that feeling again. It was a definite presence.

“Anyone there?” There was no answer. Eloise stood quietly and listened. Everything sounded normal yet there was a slight breeze that was not there before when she had come downstairs to do the washing. “Caitriona?” It sounded crazy to her own ears, but Eloise knew someone was there and the first person she could think of was her ancestress. A breath whispered against her ear.

“Yes?”

“Holy crap.” That could only be Caitriona unless she had another dead relative hell-bent on making her life difficult. And despite how weird it was to feel her close by, it was also a good thing. They could sort this out woman to woman and move on. “Caitriona, I think the man—um, vampire—who dumped you was an idiot and, while I understand the whole wrath and fit-of-pique thing, taking it out on another kinswoman seems kind of pissy to me.”

“I have to,” a soft voice with the hint of the Scottish Highlands replied.

“Whoa.” Eloise swung around a couple of times to see where she was but there was no one. “Why?”

“I need to make sure.”

The words were breathed out and matched the pace of the lazy wind that blew around Eloise. “Of what?”

“That love can exist no matter what happens.”

Eloise could hear the pain the women’s voice. “What did that pig do to you?”

“There was another woman.”

“I hate it when men do that.” Eloise knew from her Uncle McManus that Caitriona had been so distraught she had killed herself. She had been thirty years old. It had been a complete waste of a life.

“He was weak.”

Eloise snorted. “They all lead with their cocks.”

A strange, trilling laugh sounded. “I like you, kinswoman.”

Hopefully that meant she could talk Caitriona out of any more challenges. Arrow was a big enough one by himself. “Don’t test me, then.”

“I have to. It is written.”

Eloise was going to debate that fact, but the woman had freaky power and three more goes at testing her so it was better to stay on her good side.

“I spoke the words. I must see it though.”

Caitriona was a woman of her word. Eloise expected no less from someone she was related to. She sighed deeply. “Can I then suggest you make them really easy? Maybe you could challenge me not to eat chocolate or not to buy clothes.”

Again the light laugh sounded. “You will do well. I can see your man loves you.”

Hardly. Eloise was caught up in the surprise that she could love Arrow. She did not expect he felt the same. The man had been around. Despite all his talk about her being “the one” she doubted that meant love. But again she wasn’t about to debate the toss with Caitriona and lust was just as good as love sometimes and less complicated. The thing was, they just had to make a one-thousand-plus-year-old woman believe in them. “What happens after the tests?”

“I can live again.”

“Really?” This was not something Eloise had heard before. Uncle McManus and even Arrow only mentioned that she would be at peace. Not alive.

“Yes.”

The hopeful sound of Caitriona’s voice surprised her. It never occurred to Eloise that she could come back to life. Maybe someone else would have thought this spooky or odd, but it had been so much a part of her life that “odd” did not factor into it. “Okay, so this testing stuff has a purpose to it.” This wasn’t just about her and Arrow and sex and other things like unexpected emotions.

“Yes.”

This woman deserved another chance at life and at happiness. “I’ll do it for you.”

“Do it for yourself.”

* * * * *

“You have a red mark on your forehead.” Arrow appeared beside Eloise as she was hanging out the washing. His eyes traveled down the pale skin of her legs. Eloise looked good in shorts. Better naked, of course. It gave a vampire all sorts of ideas.

“Yes.” She did not stop to look at him.

The lady clearly had something on her mind. “You have got a lot of black stuff on the line.” In fact only a small amount of white and red—and those were knickers and towels—peeked out from the dark clothes.

“I like black.”

Uh-huh. Short sentences meant a short temper. “What’s up with you, shorty?” Although Arrow had only known Eloise for a small period of time, he knew she was not one to beat around the bush.

“Men suck.” She jabbed a peg into a towel, pinning it to the line.

“I see.” That Eloise thought men sucked did not surprise Arrow. Women had been thinking that since the dawn of time.

“I spoke to Caitriona today.” Eloise turned to look at him.

Even angry she was cute. Arrow tried not to smile as he knew that was the last thing she wanted from him.

“That prick of a vampire she fell in love with screwed around on her. She could not trust him.”

Ah, now Arrow understood. Caitriona’s words would have stirred up so some heavy emotions within Eloise. He understood that feeling. Arrow had gone from not wanting anything to do with Eloise into genuine like and respect that had now turned into deep, true love. It made him smile. *Oh how the mighty fall*. In many ways he and Eloise were exactly alike. Both capable of being alone and never wanting anyone in their lives. *Until now*. “You’re not Caitriona and I’m not him.” He would not let them end up the same way.

“Aren’t we?” She left the towel hanging by one corner as she looked at Arrow.

“No.” The woman had her hands on her hips and he knew she was ready for battle. Problem was, who was she fighting? Him or herself?

“Who are we then, fang face? We barely know each other.”

Arrow tried to take one of her hands but Eloise backed away from him. “I’m not going to let you down.”

“Easy to say now, but what if another woman—”

“What? Talks to me? Flirts with me? Smiles at me?” That Eloise was jealous was cute but she had no reason to be. “It doesn’t mean I’m unfaithful.” For the first time in his seven hundred years Arrow wanted only one woman and she was too blind to see it.

“No,” Eloise conceded. “But you’re an attractive man and I’m—”

“What?” Arrow knew that despite her bold words and smart mouth, insecurity lurked below the surface.

“I’m average and not exactly a supermodel.” She threw the peg she had clutched in her hand into the washing basket. “You could have anyone.”

“I want you.” That was pure and simple fact.

Eloise snorted. “That’s probably what Caitriona’s lover said to her just before he screwed around. Can’t you see that our lives run in parallel to theirs?”

She was a mortal woman. He was a vampire. Of course Arrow could see that but beyond bloodlines that’s all it was.

“I see what this is.” He was not about to let what they had fall to pieces. It may not be the most conventional of romances but it was theirs and he would do whatever he had to in order to protect it. “You’re scared and I’m not, and you think some half-assed hissy fit is going to chase me away.”

“Oh piss off.”

Anger was a good, honest emotion and he wanted to see how truthful it would make Eloise.

"No, I won't because I'm right about us."

Eloise charged forward and pushed at him. "This is what annoys me most about you." She slammed into him again. "You are an arrogant prick."

Arrow caught her each time. "And you can't handle the truth."

"I can if I hear it."

"Are you wanting to start a fight with me?"

"Yes." Her hands hit his chest once more.

"Go ahead. Give it your best shot, lady." He held his arms out to his side.

"Arrgh!" Eloise jumped up on him, wrapping her legs around his waist. The force of her jump sent them crashing back against the timber wall of the house. She started pummeling his chest like a wild woman.

Arrow tried very hard not to laugh. Her blows were not well aimed and most of the force had left them by the time they connected with his body. He had to admit that her body plastered against his was making him think of anything but war. "You're a fierce little thing."

"I'm not little," Eloise yelled at him as she continued to fight on even though she did not have a clue what she was doing. She was angry at him, herself and Caitriona for dragging them into this mess. "I hate you." Eloise landed one last puny slap on his shoulder. But then where would she be without Arrow? Probably alone, yet with all her washing pegged on the line.

"I love the way you hate me."

She stopped and looked at him. "What am I doing?" For the first time in her life she had no idea.

"Fighting yourself."

Arrow was right. She was. "This just can't work between us." She slid down from his body. They were too different. Her insecurity about their relationship would stand in their way. That she was even thinking "relationship" amazed Eloise. Two days ago he was just a pain in the bum she had to avoid.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm scared you'll let me down." Even as she said the words Eloise knew that was unfair of her to say. Arrow had been nothing but honest and giving.

"I won't."

I want to believe you. "Maybe I'll let you down." That was the more likely possibility. The urge to get in the car and drive off was still strong.

"You could never do that." Arrow grinned at her. "Want to slug me again?"

Eloise gave a reluctant smile in return. "I saw you laughing at me when I jumped you. It pissed me off more."

"You can jump me any time, shorty." Arrow pulled her against him. "I need you."

His cock pressing against her stomach hit home that fact. "I can feel that."

"Right now."

"Here?" Eloise unwrapped her legs from his waist and tried to move away from him.

Arrow turned her so she was now the one with her back to the wall. There was no escape from what they had together and they both knew it.

He tugged on her shorts until they hit the ground. He smiled. "No underwear. I like it." Arrow's hand cupped her pussy. "Did you stop wearing them because I asked?"

"Yes." Eloise pushed against the warmth of hand. The idea that she allowed him access to touch her whenever he wanted made her wet. "You want to—"

"Fuck you up against this wall?"

"Someone will see." Though even as she said the words her care factor as to whether they did or not was not high. She kicked the shorts free of her ankles.

"Who?" He lifted her ass with his hands.

Eloise jumped up into his arms, once more wrapping her legs around Arrow's waist. Looking over his shoulder, she could see nothing much as the large heritage green water tank obscured the view.

Arrow leaned into her, holding her with one arm so his other hand could undo his trousers. "Do you care what others think? As far as I am concerned, there is only you and me and no one else matters."

He was right. When she was with him, their own world was the only thing she cared about. She leaned in and kissed him. That took them both by surprised for she had never done that before.

“Oh how I adore you,” Arrow murmured against her lips.

“Get your pants off and that cock inside me now.”

Arrow threw back his head and laughed. “I like this pushy side to you.” He freed his cock.

Eloise reached for it and positioned it at the core of her body. She had been hot and wet for him from the moment she had seen him. “Take my shirt off.”

“Hang on.” After a series of maneuvers that would have made a contortionist proud, Eloise was bare-breasted.

“Suck me,” she whispered low as her eyes locked with his. “Fuck me.”

Arrow groaned and shoved his cock deep inside her as his mouth fastened on one pink nipple.

Eloise choked back the scream that came to her lips. This was exactly what she needed. The suction of his mouth competed with the pounding of his cock. The forbidden aspect of the moment was also exciting. That they could be seen and caught made her even hotter. “Hurry up.”

Arrow looked up at her. “I see you have dominatrix tendencies.”

“No, I just know what I want.” Her head clunked back against the wall as he increased his pace within.

“And you want me.” His smile was arrogant and pleased.

“As you want me.”

“For life, shorty, for life.” Arrow’s hands were firm on her butt. “Hang on.”

Eloise would have thought it was impossible to fuck even harder at that angle, but then Arrow was a man on a mission and they had the same goal. To come in each other’s arms. His mouth fastened on her other breast. Eloise felt her body start to shake as a wild feeling of joy erupted through her. “Oh Arrow.” Her head dropped against his shoulder as she allowed him to do whatever he wanted for she was completely and utterly his.

Arrow’s mouth lifted to find hers and the kiss he gave her was like the breath of life. It sent her nerve endings tingling. As the orgasm hit, Eloise knew that whatever else happened between them, she would never forget how much she loved Arrow at that moment.

“Was that good for you?” His lips teased hers as they held on to each while their bodies calmed down.

“The best. You are the best.” She craned her neck to the side in invitation. “Bite me.” She saw the need in his eyes. “Please.” As he sucked on her neck, Eloise sighed in satisfaction. She had never been happier in her life.

“Still hate me, shorty?” Arrow asked as he finished feeding on her blood, his fingers gentle as he stopped the flow.

“Very much so.” *I hate you so much I love you.*

Arrow’s eyes searched hers. Their bodies were still locked together. “You know what?”

Yeah, she knew. Eloise was sure what she saw in his eyes reflected her own. “Don’t say it.” She knew he was going to say he loved her and it was all too soon for that.

“I feel it though.”

“I know.” Eloise did as well.

“You too?” Arrow was pleased by the fact.

She put his hands to his lips. “Not yet.”

“You have to admit it some time. Truth sets you free.”

“And denial helps you sleep at night, fang face.”

“You’re a hard one.”

“No, that would be you.” That Arrow was once more becoming stiff inside her was thrilling.

He chuckled. “I hate you so much I can barely think straight.”

“Hate me faster...harder.” Once more Eloise held on for the ride.

* * * * *

“This cannot happen.” The old crone known only as Darragh was not happy. She and her two companions muttered dark, ancient words as they looked into the fire and saw the lovers mate once more.

“We cannot allow Caitriona to live again.” Finella spat into the fire, extinguishing it.

Sineag agreed. “She knows too much. Caitriona can destroy us.”

“And the natural order of things,” Finella added.

“This pair will stay together if we don’t do something.” Despite neither the vampire nor the mortal admitting it, Darragh knew true love when she saw it and it sickened her. They had worked too long to keep Caitriona at bay. They would not let her live now.

“I never thought a Gaunt woman would fall for another one of his kind.” Finella stood and began pacing. None of them had. They had believed they were safe. Previous Gaunt women had not been like this one. “I thought maybe she—”

“No, and it’s just like the gods to create mayhem when we saw none.” Sineag sat back and looked at her companions. “This woman of Gaunt does not understand her own heart at times, so how could we have foreseen that?”

“So we have to kill the mortal.” Darragh saw no other option.

“Yes, I still have the knife Caitriona used to end her own life.”

Just like Sineag to trophy hunt. “Good. Justice will be done.”

Chapter Seven

When the lightning struck her car with a whopping great crash that shook the front of Voodoo You, Eloise yelled and dropped down behind the counter. She knew it was her car as it was the first day in three weeks she had managed to score a park right out the front and the car that was on fire was in that parking space. When the next strike took out the awning of the shop, Eloise stood up and swore. She heard Mesopia screaming from the office in the back. It was a sunny day. There were no clouds. What the hell was going on?

Mesopia ran to her with a piece of paper in hand. “Are you okay?” They both screamed when a bolt of electricity took out the potted geraniums at the entranceway. “Damn! I loved those.” She looked at her Eloise. “What have you done?”

Eloise looked at her in surprise. “Why would it be me?” Though in all likelihood it was with the whole Caitriona situation, but she still didn’t want to be the first one to be blamed.

“Because you’re the one with a sexy vampire and a thousand-year-old woman wanting you to do tests.”

“Yeah, but you’re not exactly normal either, Mesopia.”

Her friend thought about that for a moment. “Okay, fair comment,” she conceded.

Arrow appeared like a lightning bolt. He went immediately to Eloise’s side.

“What have you done?” both women yelled in unison, and moved in close to him for protection.

He looked at them in amusement. “Me? Why do you assume it has anything to do with me?”

Stuff like this did not normally happen to Eloise. “It’s us combined that’s the problem.” That had to be it. There could be no other reason.

Arrow smiled at her words. “There’s an us?”

Damn he was gorgeous. The instinct to throw herself into his arms and kiss him was powerful. But kissing did not solve problems. It started a whole set of new ones with them. Instead she remained stiffly at his side.

“Well, of course there is. There is no way I could have gotten into all this trouble by myself.” Eloise decided to ignore the smile. It was safer that way. The whole idea of loving him was still raw and new, and she didn’t want to give herself away completely. She was close but not there yet. Added to that, what had happened to Caitriona and her vampire lover was in Eloise’s mind. Arrow was a sensual, highly sexual man. He could have any woman he wanted. That he wanted her now, regardless of the whole curse thing, did not mean he would want her after their job was done. Arrow had promised her no fairy-tale endings or deep love or commitment. He was just as likely to wander off and leave her when the dust cleared and she had to remember that. Eloise felt them both staring her. “What?”

“You went off into a little world of your own there.” Mesopia’s laugh was a little shaky. “That was a hell of a test that the Scottish broad put you through.”

That was true. “That had to be three bolts of lightning at least so that means three less tests to do.” Eloise knew that was an exaggeration but if she said it out loud maybe it would come true.

Arrow shook his head. “No, it’s only a test at a time if it’s you and me. This all started before I got here and Mesopia doesn’t count.

The woman in question looked less than impressed. “Well, thank you very much.”

“You know what I mean,” Arrow told her.

“Well, I don’t.” Eloise was more confused than ever. If that wasn’t a test from Caitriona, then what was it?

“I think there is someone else.” Mesopia looked thoughtful as she toyed with the piece of paper in her hand.

“Oh crap, who else do I have to deal with?”

Arrow nodded his head. “Mesopia could be right. This is a big thing. One thousand years have passed and there is the possibility that a long-dead woman can come back to life.”

Eloise hadn’t thought about it like that. She had only been concerned with her part in the whole scheme of it. “Do you think she had enemies?”

“Everyone does,” Mesopia responded. “And they would be extra mean if they have been holding on this long.”

One thousand years was a long time to hold a grudge and not be able to act on it. “So you’re thinking that someone believes fang face and I will get together.”

“We are together,” Arrow pointed out to Eloise. “You’re just too stubborn to admit it.”

Am not. Eloise preferred to think of it as being careful. “So if we pass the ‘tests’ and free Caitriona we piss off her enemies?” *Lovely. Can any of this get more complicated?*

“Exactly.” Mesopia nodded. “I’ve been thinking there has to be more to the whole Caitriona story than we know, so I did a little digging while you were off having sex with the luscious vampire. I emailed some contacts and I got this response.” She held out the paper in her hands to Eloise. “Don’t look at me like that. I only just downloaded it when the whole blowing-up thing started.”

Eloise took the paper and scanned the contents quickly. She herself should have thought to do this but unlike Mesopia, Eloise was too impatient to research everything.

“Witches? Like *Macbeth*? Seriously?” She handed it to Arrow.

Arrow did not look surprised. “I’ve heard of this before.” He noted Eloise’s look of shock. “Well, I have been alive seven hundred years, shorty. I have picked up some knowledge. William Shakespeare wasn’t the only one who knew that these hags existed. Everything, no matter how small or strange, has some basis in truth.”

All Eloise could remember of the play *Macbeth* was a strong woman badgering a weak man to act and seize power while a bunch of old crones sat around a cauldron. *I should have paid more attention in English class at high school.* “Okay then, so these women don’t like Caitriona and they’re worried she’ll come back to life, and do what?” What did her kinswoman have over these witches?

Mesopia shrugged her shoulders. “Well, that’s the thing, isn’t it? Caitriona has to have something on them so getting rid of you is their only option to thwart her.”

And Arrow was immortal so he was safe. At least that was something. Eloise shook herself mentally. She chose not to analyze those thoughts any further for fear of feeling emotions she was scared to admit to. “Jeez, does life ever get any easier? Now I have to dodge tests and worry about three bitches from a thousand years ago out for revenge.”

* * * * *

“I should be doing something.” Instead here she was lying in a hammock with Arrow under the shade of a palm tree on the deserted island where they had first made love.

“What?” Arrow’s hand stroked her stomach as they lay side by side.

“I don’t know,” she sighed. The whole lightning-witch thing had freaked her out. And that was not the only thing worrying her. She squirmed slightly. “I just know my skin is going to be a crisscross pattern when I get up.” Arrow being Arrow had made sure they had arrived naked at their destination. “I swear you have a one-track mind.” The hammock was large enough for two, but with Arrow at her side it was too small and confined. This wasn’t a bad thing. It was actually quite excellent but it did not solve the problems they faced. She was supposed to be thinking about them and not how good it would feel to have him inside her once more.

Arrow laughed at her words and maneuvered Eloise so he was lying under her. “Better?”

Very much so. Eloise lay on his body, the warmth like a soothing balm.

“It will be okay, shorty. You just need to relax.”

Eloise looked into his eyes and smiled. “How am I supposed to relax with that sticking into me?” She reached down and stroked his cock.

“I can feel how wet you are against my skin, why not slide on down over my friend and we’ll all be at peace?”

“Sex doesn’t solve everything.” If only it were that easy.

“No, but a ninety-percent offering can often lead the way to a solution.”

Eloise looked into his beautiful blue eyes and felt safe with Arrow. No one had ever made her feel that way. “You have an answer for everything.”

“You make it easy for me.”

Did she? How was that when she had no idea what she was doing? “How is this going to work?”

Arrow smiled up at her. “It’s the old part A into slot B thing.”

She slapped his chest. "I don't mean the sex." The physical was easy. The emotional was much more difficult.

"I know. Do you know what your problem is?" His hands urged her pelvis onto his.

"I suspect you're going to tell me." Eloise rubbed her wet pussy against the head of his cock.

"You think too much."

"Maybe." She impaled herself on the length of his cock in one stroke. "How's that for not thinking?" Eloise had just done what she wanted to. She began slowly rocking back and forward on top of him.

"Excellent." Arrow's hands reached up and fondled her breasts. "Doesn't that feel better?"

It did. There was only her and Arrow, and whatever problems they faced were far away. She leaned down and rested on his chest.

"Doesn't any of this scare you?" Eloise wanted to be brave and fearless but it was pretty hard with so much going on.

"Only that you will be stubborn and walk out on me."

Walking away had never been the plan. Driving had though. However that idea was no longer feasible with her car a steaming pile of scorched metal beside the curb. But car or no car, Eloise needed to be with Arrow more than she needed to run from him. "Really?"

"Yes."

"How can that be?"

"That you have become a massive part of my life?" His hands moved down to caress her ass.

Eloise moved her body slowly back and forth. "We didn't even know each other last week."

"But we knew that there was this other person who would change our lives."

She stopped and looked at him. "Did you want to change your life?" That concept had never occurred to her.

"Didn't you?"

"Hmm, you're being evasive." What was he hiding? Why would he want to change his life? He was immortal. He could do anything.

"And you're being slow." Arrow slapped her ass.

"I'm scared that if I go any faster this hammock will fall under our weight." She sat up and looked at him in concern. Eloise wanted to go fast but she did not want bruises added to the crisscrosses on her skin.

"Trust me it's solid."

"Okay then." Besides, if she fell it would be onto him and there were worse fates. Eloise started to move her hips faster, her breasts bouncing as she sought to give in to the feeling that was building up through her body. She encouraged Arrow's hands back on her breasts and sighed as he tugged at the nipples. Just as she felt the orgasm hit, the rope on the hammock snapped and sent them crashing onto the sand. Eloise yelled in ecstasy as the force of it drove Arrow's cock hard up inside her, his pelvic bone hitting her clit one last glorious time. She collapsed on his body, shaking. "Wow," she moaned, feeling him shoot high up inside her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm in heaven," Arrow growled in low contentment as he wrapped his arms around her body.

Eloise started giggling. Hammock sex was a mad idea.

"What?"

"You're crazy, fang face." She touched his face softly. Crazy yet wonderful. Eloise felt more alive and happy than she had in a long time.

"So are you." They both started laughing at the tangled heap they found themselves in." Arrow stopped and put his fingers to her lips. "I think I hear laughing. A woman."

"Sounds like Caitriona." It was light and soft and unmistakably pleased. "I'm not sure I like this voyeuristic side of my kinswoman." It was a little too weird having someone who was technically dead watching them.

"You know I think that was a test." Arrow nodded at her confused look. "Think about it. What it shows is that we can laugh together regardless of what happens."

That was not a bad test as tests went. A sense of humor was always important. "So we've had need, trust, faith and giving. What next? Flood, famine? Boils?"

Arrow rolled her over onto her back in the sand. "Let's worry about that later and let me fuck you again now." He kissed her hungrily.

Eloise automatically wrapped her legs around his waist. She hated sand between her toes.

* * * * *

The lightning failed." Finella did not sound impressed. "I told you it would. Lightning is only ever good if the target is outside."

"Well, you did nothing," Sineag snapped angrily. "At least I tried to solve our problem."

Darragh tried not to listen to the two women argue. She had spent an eternity doing just that. As soon as they quashed both Gaunt women, Darragh would be free of both of her companions. To be doomed through eternity with this pair was becoming unbearable. Only one of the three of them would survive if they did succeed in destroying Caitriona and her kin for it would weaken all three witches. Darragh planned to be the last one standing and usurp what powers they had. Fortunately for her the other two would probably still be at each other's throats and would not have time to challenge her in the end.

If Darragh could outwit and outlast these two, then she could once again become mortal herself. She had lost that connection to humanity when Caitriona had died. For every action there was a reaction and it was not always positive. The power they had used to get rid of Caitriona's lover had cost all three of them their humanity. At the time, Darragh had thought it was worth it. But it wasn't. To allow either Gaunt woman to live ruined her chance to live again.

Darragh thought about Caitriona. They had been very close friends once. In some ways like sisters. It had been so very long ago. Darragh had planned to maneuver Caitriona to marry the Lord of Caithness. His power had been immense. Darragh had been going to use the beautiful Caitriona to gain and enhance her own power. But the vampire had come between them and it had been necessary to remove him from the scene. Caitriona had been unworldly and it had been easy to make her believe he loved another. She had not realized that the "other" was merely a spell cast to make her think that.

Darragh had joined forces with the local witches Sineag and Finella. The three of them had hatched a plan to get rid of the vampire and keep Caitriona under their control. The spell was supposed to make Caitriona despise her lover. But when she had killed herself instead, it had been a shock and so unlike the strong-willed Caitriona. Darragh had not believed it. Her death had killed any dreams of greatness Darragh'd had. While she was a witch in her own right, Darragh did not have the power she craved. Manipulating Caitriona would have gotten her what she wanted. Now the best Darragh could hope for was to become mortal. It wasn't an ideal choice, but when she looked around the current state of the world, she knew that was her only option for survival. While Darragh had power, it was limited and in many ways could not compete with the power of the modern age.

Did Caitriona still pine for her lover? If only she knew what had really happened. *But I cannot allow her to live to find out.* Darragh drew a deep breath. Much was at stake here.

"Shut up, the two of you." Both women looked at her in anger yet Darragh knew neither would strike out at her as they were both scared of her. Fools. Their combined power could destroy her. *Why did I ever align myself with such harpies?* Darragh knew the answer. She had needed both of them at the time to rid Caitriona of her lover. "There are two more tests that this Gaunt woman and her lover must go through." It was all to do with love and fidelity. So like Caitriona to mutter those words to the heavens before she died. They had then been handed faithfully handed down through the generations.

"So?" Finella waited for more.

Stupid woman. It was obvious to Darragh. "So we issue the tests instead of Caitriona. We make them believe it's all over and done with."

Sineag rolled her eyes in contempt. "To what point?"

You will be the first one I will gladly destroy and take power from. Darragh had always been suspicious of Sineag's part in the death of Caitriona. "To split up the vampire and woman."

"How?"

In some ways Finella was too stupid to kill. But the stupid and the helpless needed to die as they were of no use to anyone. "Vampires are about sex and—"

"Another woman." Sineag smiled, a row of rotting teeth on display.

I must watch Sineag. "Yes, one Arrow cannot resist."

"I can do it. I have done it before." Sineag's eyes were wild with excitement. "I was the one, after all, who took the vampire from Caitriona." She looked quite pleased at the thought.

Sineag was an expert in morphing into any image she chose. Darragh had to admit she had been very good at making Caitriona believe her lover was with another. "Yes, you were good."

"She's a slut," Finella pronounced in disgust. There was no love lost between any of them.

"Jealous cow." Sineag looked like she could not care less about her opinion. "Just because no man has ever wanted you."

"Enough!" If only Darragh could allow them to tear each other apart. But now was not the time. She needed them a little bit longer. "We have to concentrate or we are doomed." Although the other two women did stop bickering, Darragh knew if she turned her back on them they would destroy her. "We will give these tests. They have to revolve around what is important to lovers—faith, loyalty and commitment."

Finella grimaced in distaste. "Why couldn't Caitriona just have died like any normal person?"

"Because she wasn't." Caitriona had also been special even for a mortal. Now that she was back, her powers were unknown. A lot could happen after lying dormant for one thousand years. Death was not always an ending.

"And you didn't help things, taking her man," Finella snapped at both of them. "I never agreed to that plan. He was a vampire. He would have left her as they all do. None of them is faithful to anything but sex."

Sineag snorted, "You do not know them as I do. Besides, her lover was weak and I was too beautiful for him to resist." She stroked her long gray hair as if it were silk.

If Caitriona finds out it was you took him, you'll die first."

Although Finella may be the weaker of the two of them, Darragh knew she was smart enough to realize that after one thousand years, Caitriona had powers that they could only guess about. Darragh walked away from the squabbling women. This had to end quickly. The longer Caitriona was alive, the harder it would be to get rid of her. Her kinsman woman Eloise appeared to be headstrong and unthinking. Besides that, she wanted the "tests" of faith over and done with. Her impatience would work in their favor.

Chapter Eight

The speeding car was almost upon them when Eloise reacted by grabbing Arrow's arm and pulling him back against her as he went to step off the curb. He had been so absorbed in looking at her that he had not seen it. The car hurtled by, missing them both by mere inches.

"Bloody hell." Arrow turned to see the car roar off in the distance.

Even though he was an immortal being, the thought that anything could happen to him had made her hold on extra tight to Arrow. "You have to be more careful, fang face."

He lifted one hand and stroked her face. "You saved my life, shorty."

Eloise knew she had to get a grip. That had to have been a test and that meant whatever this whole thing was between them was coming to an end. Whatever happened, she had to prepare herself for possible disappointment. "Not really. You're immortal, you can't die." But she could and even if they were meant to be together, what sort of togetherness would that be with her aging and him not? Eloise knew she would not want Arrow to be with her out of pity and she did not want to be one of those mutton-dressed-as-lamb women trying to relive her youth to fit in.

"I may be, but being hit by a car would have hurt like hell." Arrow's eyes pondered the look in hers. "What?"

Eloise pushed away from him. It was hard to think with so much hot, male flesh at her beck and call.

"Even if we believed this whole crazy thing about being soul mates—"

"If?" Arrow sounded as if it were not possible to think otherwise.

"Yes 'if.'" One of them had to be practical and it had to be her. Eloise was the one who lived a real life where people lived and died and got killed by out-of-control cars. "How can any of this between us be real and forever when your concept of eternity and mine are completely different? I'm not immortal. I am going to age. You're not going to want to stick around me then."

"So what? Better to push me away now?"

"Yes." There was no point sugarcoating it. Reality was rarely ever frosted with cinnamon.

"Listen up, Eloise Gaunt, I am unpushable." Arrow pulled her close once more. "Have you ever read the words that Caitriona spoke?"

"Listen up Eloise Gaunt, I am unpushable." Arrow pulled her close once more. "Have you ever heard the words that Caitriona spoke?"

Until that moment, it had never occurred to Eloise to ask the exact wording mainly because hearing it would make it too real. "No, my Uncle McManus told me the story and to watch out for you because you would be trouble."

Arrow grinned. "Me? Trouble? Come on, we've had fun, haven't we?"

Arrow grinned. "Me? Trouble? Come on, we've had fun, haven't we?"

Yes, they had, but fun was not a constant in real life. "You're immortal."

"Until we pass the last test."

Eloise jerked forward in his arms. "What?"

"Your uncle obviously never told you that when soul mates meet and become one each must give up something," Arrow explained. "Caitriona's dying words were recorded by a priest. They were in Gaelic of course but the translation goes something like this. *Although I may pass from this world at the betrayal of a treasonous lover, I decree that in one thousand years a kinswoman will meet the one who is straight and true. I will be avenged when all seven tests between a Gaunt and vampire are done. Only through the love of true souls giving up what makes them solitary can I be made whole.*"

Eloise felt a shiver run down her spine. "Did you make that up?" She wanted to believe he had but she knew he was speaking the truth.

Arrow shook his head in amusement. "Would I do that?" He curled an arm around her shoulder as they started to walk. "Come on, stop being so suspicious. You've heard Caitriona yourself."

That was true. It sounded like something a dying, pissed-off woman would say.

"So I willingly give up my immortality for you, shorty."

"You would?" The idea was mind-boggling. Most people would kill for immortality yet here Arrow was ready to toss it aside like an old shoe. "But you would

be human and die.”

“I want be with you.”

“But what if we’re not really soul mates?” Arrow’s laughter echoed with the sound of incredulity. “We may not be.” More laughter followed. “Okay, so what do I, a mere mortal, have to give up?” Eloise had nothing of any worth that she could see.

“You give up fighting the inevitable and admit that I am the only man who can possibly understand and love you. You need me, shorty.”

That all sounded so simple and neat but life was never that way. Besides, she wasn’t about to give away any more of herself than she already had. “So we have one test left.” If she focused on that, then at least that would give her time to think about the whole soul-mate thing and whether she wanted to be stuck with a reformed vampire.

“Yes we do.” Arrow leaned his forehead against hers. “I love you, Eloise.”

She gulped. *If only I could believe that.* It might make the jumble of thoughts inside her mind even out and be easier to handle. This was all happening too fast and making hasty declarations in the heat of a moment was not wise. “You don’t have to say that.” It was probably something soul mates felt obliged to say. Up until this moment, Eloise did not believe in the hype of the one perfect person for everyone. The marry-for-five-seconds-and-then-divorce rate proved that was a crock.

“I say it because I mean it.”

Eloise placed her hands on his chest. Arrow’s heartbeat was true and strong, just like the man. She shook her head in wonder. *Just like the man? How do I know him so well after so little time together?* “Let’s just get through test seven and see how we feel after that.”

“You can’t hide from this anymore, shorty.”

“I’m not hiding I’m, er, assessing my options.” Same thing but Eloise wasn’t about to admit that.

Arrow laughed at her distinction. “You are beautiful.” He hugged her to his side. “What do you want to do today?”

“I should be at work.” None of this was real and yet reality never felt more so.

“I don’t think Mesopia will care. It’s not like there’s been a rush on yak snot.”

“It’s yak spit from Tibet.” Not that it mattered. Mucous was mucous no matter what fancy label was put on it.

“Come on.” Arrow nudged his hip against hers. “If you could pick anywhere in the world you could be right now, where would it be?”

I just want to be with you. “I need to go grocery shopping.” It was better to be rational and practical. Wandering off to exotic climes with the hot vampire was not good if he was not in it for the long haul, and all the pretty words and orgasms in the world could not convince her he was. Wanting and being were completely different.

“Hmm, not what I had in mind.”

“Have you never been to a supermarket? How do you get food?” Eloise knew he needed blood to sustain him, but how did Arrow eat and where? In some ways she felt as if she had known him forever yet little things escaped her.

“I eat when I’m hungry and I just spin off somewhere exotic and get something I fancy.”

Eloise snorted. “Well, that’s all going to stop if you become mortal.”

“It’s ‘when’, shorty, and I will gladly give up whatever I have to in order to be with you. I have heard about grocery shopping but never indulged.”

Indulged? There was nothing indulgent about it. “I have to warn you that people who shouldn’t drive cars let alone wheel trolleys of food, are let loose in a maze to hunt food.” It was not something Eloise ever looked forward to doing.

“But that could be fun.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t blame me when someone runs over your foot with a wonky wheel.”

“A what?” Arrow’s eyes were full of amusement.

Eloise stopped and looked at him. “Oh come on. You’ve been alive seven hundred years and you don’t know that all supermarket trolleys are deliberately made with crooked wheels to keep you longer in the store to buy crap you didn’t need?”

“Show me, shorty.”

That look he gave her made her knickers smolder. “You have much to learn, fang face.” *And I have decisions to make.*

* * * * *

Arrow pulled Eloise back against him for protection. “She could have killed you.” A woman shot past, barely acknowledging the fact that she had nearly taken off Eloise’s foot in her mad rush to pass them. His first instinct was that of wanting to hunt the careless woman down and teach her a lesson, but Eloise had stopped him.

“When there is a red-light special on in the bakery section, people will maim you to get one dollar off bread.”

"Do you need bread? I'm prepared to do battle with those women." Of course Arrow had seen these large, ugly, generic shopping malls in his travels, but he had always chosen to bypass them as they appeared to be tedious and provincial. He had not been aware that under the harsh lighting, seemingly normal mortals became crazed hunters ready to maim for what they wanted. Arrow gripped the handle of the trolley and was ready to do anything Eloise requested, wonky wheel and all.

"That's sweet of you but I'll pass." Eloise dropped a jar of Vegemite in the trolley and looked to her left. "Who is that woman?"

"I have no idea." Arrow knew exactly who Eloise was referring to. He had seen the blonde ten minutes ago. It had been impossible not to. The woman was wearing a tight mini-skirted red dress that left very little to the imagination. That she wore no bra under her tight tank top indicated she wanted attention. Maybe once Arrow would have given it to her but not now. Eloise was the only woman he desired. "What?" He saw the look Eloise gave him. It was one of confusion.

"The way she's looking at you makes me think she knows you."

And that was the thing. Arrow felt he did know her, that she was connected to the supernatural world and not of the mortal trolley-set. "I do not know her nor do I want to." The flaunted charms of the blonde could not compete with the quirky peasant Gothic beauty of Eloise. But he had to wonder why she was staring at him so intently. It was clearly a come-and-take-me look. Arrow had been on the receiving end of many of those. But why so obvious especially as he was with another woman?

"She is gorgeous."

The dull tone of Eloise's voice caught at Arrow. Surely she did not think he could ever be interested in this woman? What he had with Eloise was for life. He needed her. He adored her. *And I am no longer lonely*. Arrow did not speak those words. As much as she tried to act otherwise, he did not want the soft-hearted Eloise being with him because he was lonely. This was all or nothing. Eloise had to want to be with him because there was no power on earth that could stop her.

"No one compares to you, shorty." What was it with mortal women? The few flaws they perceived they had seemed to blind them to their beauty.

"Good answer, fang face." She fumbled with her list. "I guess you're used to women. You know—"

"What?" All his attention was on Eloise. She was cute when she was confused. Arrow knew there had to be a lot of conflicting emotions within her. No matter what warning her uncle might have given her, this had still taken her by surprise. That she loved him, Arrow did not doubt. Curse or no curse, Eloise was not a woman to give herself away unless it meant something. He longed for the day she admitted she loved him.

"Well, I mean, you know, you must have lots of women looking at you."

Ah jealousy. The words "I love you" may not have come from her mouth but it was pretty close. He picked up her free hand and kissed the palm.

"I'm yours, Eloise, as you are mine. Whatever happened in the past is the past."

Her eyes were enormous on his. "Um, I need eggs."

"Believing in us does not weaken you."

"I think they're in aisle seven."

Eloise moved off before Arrow could speak. He didn't fail to notice the look of distaste Eloise gave the blonde woman. He followed behind, his eyes glancing only once at the blonde. She smiled a smile he was only too familiar with. It was all promise and no substance. Arrow needed more than that now and he had that with Eloise.

"Sineag is making a fool of herself." Finella eyed the blonde in disgust. She and Darragh had cloaked themselves in invisibility and taken up their positions to watch. "Her breasts are practically falling out."

"Yes, but she has the vampire's attention." Darragh was not surprised by this, as Sineag had morphed into a near-naked harpy to attract him.

Finella nodded reluctantly. "He does look interested. This just may work."

"Yes, and more importantly the Gaunt woman looks upset." That was most important. They needed to sow the seeds of doubt in her mind. "All we need is for her to believe he is unfaithful and then that ruins any chance of the last test being passed." Or of Caitriona coming back to life and wreaking whatever havoc she planned. But that was not something she wanted Finella to be focused on. If she did, then Darragh could not harness her powers to save her own life.

"Mortals are so foolish." Finella's voice was full of contempt.

"You were one of them once."

Finella turned on Darragh, her eyes sharp with knowledge. "And you want to be again. I'm not stupid, Darragh. I know you plan to get rid of us but I'm not as compliant as you think."

Damn. This was not what Darragh needed. Sineag could be dealt with easily for her own ego would destroy her. But Finella suspecting her true intent was not something Darragh had planned on. It was true. The quiet ones were always the most surprising.

"Then I'll have to work with you." *Until I can work out how to get rid of you.*

“Or kill me.” The two exchanged glances. They knew where they stood. “Either way that slut Sineag dies.” Finella was adamant on that.

“Yes.” At least they agreed on something.

* * * * *

“What is it?”

Eloise had been unusually quiet on the way home in the car. They had borrowed Mesopia’s. Arrow knew it had to be about the woman they had seen.

“Nothing,” she murmured as she began unloading bags from the car. “I have one last test to get through and then—”

“‘We’ have the last test to get through.” That she was thinking in the singular was not something Arrow wanted to hear. They were in this together. He loved her and he knew he could make her believe in it.

“Yes.”

Arrow took the grocery bag from her and clasped her hand in his. “Come on, talk to me, shorty.”

“I don’t know.”

“In your heart you do.” The confusion he saw in her eyes made him want to take her in his arms and kiss any doubts she had away.

“Maybe I don’t have a heart.”

Eloise had one of the biggest hearts he knew of. “Yeah you do, you just choose not to use it.”

“Oh Arrow, I—”

He looked at her in wonder as he picked her up and spun her in his arms. “You called me Arrow.” It made him feel ridiculously happy. “Fang face is sexy though.” He placed her feet on the ground, his hands moving down to her ass.

Eloise tried half-heartedly to push back from him. “We can’t keep having sex like this.”

“If I did not touch you at least once every hour I would die.”

She snorted in laughter. “Very poetic from the immortal being—hey!” Eloise was forced gently back against the car by Arrow.

He made sure he covered every inch of her body with his with his as he leaned in and started kissing her passionately. He wanted to remove any ounce of doubt she had. “You just don’t get it, do you?” He said in between kisses, giving her a chance to breathe.

“What?” Eloise panted out as she clutched hold of him in need.

“Us.”

“There is no us.” Her eyes were soft and willingly but he wanted more from Eloise.

“You try my patience, shorty.” His mouth found hers once more and he kissed her without mercy. Neither spoke as they gave over to the passion of the moment. Eloise’s legs lifted around his waist and Arrow contemplated who could see them if he took her on the hood of the car.

“Arrow,” she whimpered as their lips broke free. “Make love to me.”

Make love? It was exactly what he needed to hear from the woman he loved. Arrow pulled at the buttons of her shirt. He needed to taste more and her writhing body underneath his promised great delight for both of them.

“Hello? Anyone there?”

“What the fuck?” Eloise murmured when she heard the woman’s voice. She looked into Arrow’s eyes and saw the same confusion and disappointment she felt.

“I seem to have a flat tire.”

Eloise’s first thought was “Who gives a shit?” Her second was to look up and see who it was. Bloody hell. It was the blonde bimbo. “Do you live around here?” *Or are just stalking on the off chance you’ll get lucky?*

The woman’s eyes were on Arrow as the two lovers stood. “I need help.”

“I’ll call the nearest auto mechanic.” Eloise did not give Arrow a chance to speak. She could see the amusement in his face. Well, let him be. She was sure if some man were after her he would not take it peacefully. Well, at least she hoped he wouldn’t.

“It wouldn’t take long for you to change it and I would really appreciate it.”

It was as if Eloise were not there at all. She was totally ignored by the blonde. Her sticky-sweet words made Eloise want to puke.

“Certainly,” Arrow murmured as he walked toward the woman.

“What?” Eloise looked at him in amazement. He knew she did not like the woman yet there he was, going straight to her.

“I will be back, shorty.”

“Like I give a rat’s ass,” she muttered as she began rebuttoning her blouse. “If you touch her, then you are never touching me again.” That was a fact set in stone.

“What?” Arrow turned around and looked at her.

“Nothing, dear,” Eloise responded overly sweetly, wishing all sorts of evil down on the blonde’s head.

An hour later he appeared in her bedroom.

“You’re a bit late. I’ve put all the groceries away.” She was getting ready to have a shower, and after that the plan had been to mope on her bed while eating Tim Tams and not thinking about Arrow.

“Are you okay?” Arrow watched as she moved around the bedroom, picking up things.

“Fine.” Eloise picked up fresh knickers and deliberately waved them in the air. It was like a flag of defiance, as if cotton could bar his entry.

Arrow made a grab for the knickers and tossed them against the wall. “You don’t sound fine.”

Eloise’s hands went to her hips. “You don’t even know me.”

“Is this because I helped that woman?”

Well, duh. “You smell of cheap perfume.” Some women have no idea of what was tasteful. *Eau de puke* at ten cents a gallon wasn’t it.

“Are you jealous that I helped her?” He smiled at the thought.

“No, I’m wondering how you got to smell so tacky.”

Arrow held his hands up in defense. “I did not touch her.”

Lucky for you. “It’s not up to me what you do or don’t do.”

“Eloise.”

“Arrow,” she mimicked back his stern tone.

“You’re being silly.”

“Am I?” Of course she was. She was silly in love over him. “Don’t you think it’s odd we’ve seen her twice in one day?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t been expecting Arrow to agree with her.

“Took the wind out of your sails, did I?”

“Somewhat.”

Arrow walked toward her. “I just wanted to see who she was.”

“And?”

“She’s just a woman who needed her tire changed.”

“Uh-huh.” *Bullshit.*

You’re cute when you’re jealous.” He leaned in and tweaked her nose.

“I’m not jealous. *Much.* “This thing between us is just...” she stopped, trying to find the right word that said what she felt but did not give it totally away.

“What?”

Eloise sighed deeply. “Well, I thought we had something more.”

“Like what?”

How non-helpful was he being? “You tell me?”

“That I love you and that despite the tough act you put on, I know you love me?” Arrow said the words so easily. “Yeah, we have that, Eloise, and I’m not interested in any other women. It’s you I want.”

Really? Her heart went all soft and gooey at his words. "It's easy to say now but what if—"

"What if I see a gorgeous woman? Yeah, I may look but that's it. And don't tell me you wouldn't look at another man's butt." Arrow's smile was teasing. "I can tell you after seven hundred years of looking that I know I have found the right woman for me." His eyes were on hers. "How many other ways can I convince you I love you, Eloise? Do you want me to drop to my knees and beg you to believe? Because I will. Do I have to swim a raging torrent? Climb a perilous peak? Walk through fire dressed in a tutu?"

That made her laugh. "You're very silly for vampire."

"Yeah, but I love you and it would not kill you to admit the same thing."

"Okay, you're right, I love me too." Eloise backed away as he moved with determination toward her. She held up her hands. "The thing is, this has been really fast for me and I'll admit I have been a little bit scared by it."

Arrow chuckled at her words. "A little bit?"

"Okay a lot."

"So?" He waited for more. "Are you going to say it?"

"Do you need to hear it?" Never having said the phrase before, she was not sure how to say it.

"Yeah, I do," Arrow responded softly.

The sound of his voice was like a plea. Eloise took a deep breath.

"Wow," he murmured.

"What?"

"This is a big thing for you, isn't it?"

"It's huge." She looked at the man in question. *Just say it.*

He stood and waited, hands on his hips. "So?"

"Don't rush me." The words were there, just stuck in her throat.

"I could die of old age waiting for you to speak."

Eloise rolled her eyes at him in annoyance. "Jeez, you're pushy. Okay, I love you. Are you happy now?" She moved in closer to him. Yes, she was scared. This was all so new to her. But she also needed to touch and taste him. She recoiled from him as another woman's scent slugged her in the nose. "You smell like a brothel." Eloise stepped backward.

"How romantic you are, shorty." He was more amused than offended at her words.

"Well, it's a horrible smell." Though not horrible enough to not feel his body against hers.

"But you love me?"

The fierce possessive need in his voice thrilled her. "Yes." No matter what she was getting herself in for that fact remained true.

"Regardless of how I smell?"

"Well..." A woman could only take so much.

Arrow held out his hand to her. "Come wash it off me."

That would be fun. "Just washing?"

"Whatever you desire, my lady."

The feel of Eloise's slippery ass rubbing up against him was driving Arrow beyond the brink and he was pretty sure she knew it.

"What?" She turned her head to look at him innocently.

"You know." There was nothing innocent about the hands that had made their way over his body, washing in him in slow, lingering strokes. There was nowhere Eloise had not touched and he had not discouraged her, and now his cock was so hard that he was in danger of exploding all over Eloise before he even got a chance to slide inside her. "You're a tease."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

Arrow loved this side of Eloise. It was sexy and playful. "Fuck you until you scream."

She arched her eyebrow cynically. "Promises, promises."

He pushed her up against the tiles until the tips of her breasts grazed the cool, white surface. Arrow moved his hands down her back to the swell of her ass, loving the way she trembled as he nudged her legs apart. He dipped his fingers into her vagina, feeling the creamy wetness that awaited him. Arrow's cock jabbed at her butt cheeks in excitement.

"Getting a little out of control there, fang face?" Her words came out in tight, short gasps that matched the rhythm of his fingers within her body.

Arrow licked her neck. He could smell the sweetness of her blood. Eloise fulfilled every need he had. Arrow wanted no other.

"Do I need control?" His hands moved from her pussy, following the crack of her ass. "Can I do what I like with you?"

"Oh yes," she moaned as her backside ground against his cock. Eloise jumped forward with a start as one long finger slid into the tight, puckered hole of her ass. "Arrow?"

"Relax, shorty, you will like this." He slowly eased his finger in and out of her body, getting her used to things to come.

"How do you know?" Eloise asked as she tuned her head to the side to see him.

Arrow chuckled at her words. "Well, I don't." Eloise had the most interesting outlook on life. She faced questions with more questions.

"Ever been touched there?"

"Nope."

"So how do you know I'll enjoy it?"

He leaned in, and whispered in her ear, "I've never had a complaint." If she asked him to stop he would. What Eloise wanted was the most important thing to him. "Trust me." He pushed a second finger in to join the first. He smiled as Eloise bent forward to accommodate him. A third finger soon followed and all three mimicked what his cock would soon be doing.

"O-oh Arrow," she sighed as she pushed back against his hand.

"Is that good?"

"Uh-huh." Eloise moved her hips in time with his pumping fingers.

"Do you want more?" When she nodded, he pulled his fingers from her anus. Her sigh of disappointment made him so hot that Arrow recited the alphabet backward to keep control. "Turn around, shorty." The look of love and outright need in her eyes made him swallow hard. Never had he imagined anyone would love him back like this. Arrow handed her a bar of sweet-smelling soap. "Lather me up."

Eloise did not need to be asked twice or told what needed to be slippery with soap. She massaged the soap into a foam balm and then reached for his cock.

Arrow's hands massaged her shoulders, his mouth teasing hers with light, feathery kisses as he held her. Eloise played with his cock until it was so slippery she had trouble holding on to it.

"Ready?" He certainly was. He needed to be in now.

She looked up at him. "If I said 'yes' would that make me look cheap and easy?" Eloise licked her lips in anticipation.

He roared with laughter at her words. She was part temptress, part innocent and she was all his. "It would make you a beautifully giving lover."

"Says he who wants to shove his cock up my ass."

Arrow kissed her hard and turned her to face the wall. "I love it when you talk dirty."

"Fuck me then." Eloise shoved her ass back and bent forward, allowing him the access he needed.

It was more than he could stand. Arrow pulled her ass cheeks apart and placed the head of his cock against the tight muscle of her ass.

Eloise pushed against him. Never in a million years would she have thought she'd invite anyone to touch her ass let alone fuck it. But more than anything she wanted his hot length inside her. As Arrow's cock pushed through the virgin passage, she reached for the faucets and held on tightly, snapping the water off as she did. Even with the promise of sex, water conservation due to the drought was an inbuilt behavior. It was the oddest sensation—not unpleasant, more tight and full with a burning heat that she wanted all the way inside her.

"Are you okay?" Arrow stopped halfway.

"Is that it? If so I'm disappointed." His laughter against her ear made her smile. To make him happy made her happy. It was not a notion she would have contemplated before as being more than a tacky slogan on a greeting card. But now Eloise knew. This was about making someone happy. It was about love. "Is that the best you've got, fang face?" In answer to that, Arrow grabbed her around the waist and surged forward into her. Eloise shook at the tight, hot feeling inside her.

"Better?"

"Oh God, yeah." As he began to move within, she moaned at the slow, pulsing rhythm. It was as if Arrow was trying to make the moment last.

This is forever, Eloise."

"Could be hard to get dressed in the morning with you attached to me like this." She jumped as he slapped her ass. It sent a tremor through her body that made her squeal with delight. "Do it again." He did. Twice more.

"I don't think I will ever get enough of you." Arrow nuzzled her lovingly.

Her heart pounded at his words. *He really loves me. This is forever.* "Arrow?"

"Yes, shorty?"

"Does this ride go faster?" She wanted the fierce pounding heat of his balls slapping against her ass as he slammed into her.

"Can you handle that?"

"Fang face, I can take anything you give me." In answer to her request, Arrow pulled out slowly and rammed back in fast. Another squeal of excitement shot from her lips.

"I love you," he growled against her ear as he sucked the lobe into his mouth.

"And I love you back." Eloise was on fire as she choked out the words. Her back arched as she took all he could give. She wanted everything from him. Every mad minute of lust, of passion and of love. Never did she want to regret not sharing her body with him. Her legs shook as an intense thrill of pleasure radiated through her pelvis and up her spine, leaving her gasping. "Bloody hell." If Arrow had not been holding her she would have fallen to the tiles below in a soggy yet satisfied heap. The triumphant laugh that came from Arrow's lips was so male and hot that she wanted him never to leave her body. She was as much apart of him as he was her. As the heat of his essence shot through her Eloise panted softly, trying to keep up with the last of his thrusts.

"Thank you." Arrow turned her head and kissed her lips as he pulled from within her. He then dropped to his knees before her.

Eloise looked at him in puzzlement, yet whatever he wanted to do she was up for it. Arrow pushed her thighs apart and kissed the inside of one. She ran her fingers through his hair at the sweet touch of his mouth on her flesh. When his teeth grazed the skin, Eloise stiffened slightly and looked down at him.

"May I?"

There was only one answer. "Yes." As his fangs pierced her flesh in one swift bite, Eloise closed her eyes as the familiar heat rushed through her veins. It was almost better than sex. Almost. She stroked his hair and let him feed from her as he needed.

"You never did that before," Eloise murmured when he finally lifted his head, his mouth red from her blood. Her inner thigh tingled from his bite.

"I thought it might freak you out."

She held her hands out to Arrow. "It was kind of sexy."

He stood up and wrapped her in his embrace. "How I adore you."

When his lips met hers, Eloise thanked God for her pissed-off kinswoman.

Chapter Nine

"So had the last test yet?" Mesopia looked up from the skull she was marking with the pricing gun.

"Nope." Eloise dropped her bag behind the counter. She didn't want to be at work. She was too restless for dealing with selling spit or skulls. She still burned from Arrow's touch and she needed so much more from him. It was strange to go from nothing to everything, running not only the gantlet but the gamut of emotions from intense dislike to deep love.

"What's up?"

"Nothing." Eloise picked up a skull and wondered who would pay twelve dollars and ninety-five cents for a plastic novelty item. Thinking about that was better than worrying about what was going on between herself and Arrow. The blonde interloper was once more on her mind. Why was this stranger suddenly in their lives? The amazing moment of making love had come after he'd been with her. *Am I being paranoid?* Thoughts of another coming between them had shaken her and that was odd in itself. Eloise was not someone who ever felt inferior yet the fact that another woman was after Arrow made her feel that way. That and as jealous as hell. It was not an emotion she knew how to deal with. Jealousy indicated that a level of possession was assumed. Part of her was still fighting her feelings for Arrow. If this had happened without the interference of the Scottish woman, then maybe it would have been easier to handle. The whole preordained thing put her on the spot, and despite her words to Arrow, in this moment of insecurity Eloise wasn't sure if what she was feeling was love or lust. The man had her body. Her heart was harder to give. "Everything is fine."

Mesopia snorted in disbelief. "Bullshit."

Eloise knew her friend was not someone she could easily fob off. "Okay there was this woman, Arrow noticed her and—"

"You're calling him Arrow now?" Mesopia looked pleased. "That's so nice."

Honestly I don't now how I feel at the moment." She told him she loved him, which was true, but then the whole thing with the blonde was still in the back of her mind.

"Yeah, you do but let's talk about the woman."

Talking about it to another woman would help. Eloise needed to know if what she was feeling was rational or not. "This trashy tart was at the supermarket and—"

"You shopped together? How sweet." Mesopia's smile was soft and teasing. She stopped when she saw the look of frustration on Eloise's face. "Sorry, tell me about the tart."

Was it sweet? Is that how it looked? Eloise sighed. "Well, she was blonde and in his face. Her boobs were hanging out in that common, overrated way men like, and Arrow could not stop looking at her." That was what annoyed Eloise most. Yes, he was a man and yes he would look at a pretty woman. That was nature. But to continue to do so or go and help her change her tire was not. Chivalry was admirable but not when it came to busty blondes with an agenda. Eloise had been all for calling a tow truck to take both the car and the blonde away.

Mesopia sighed in disappointment. "Oh and I liked him."

"Then she appears outside my house with a flat tire." The more she thought about it, the more Eloise knew it was no coincidence. What sort of a woman homes in on another man?

"That's weird." Mesopia continued marking the skulls once more. "So did Arrow help her with the tire, or did you scratch her eyes out like any rational woman would have?"

"I wanted to but I did not want it to look like—"

"You care?" The other woman guessed accurately.

"I told Arrow I loved him." That was more than just caring.

Mesopia's eyes opened wide. "Wow!"

"Exactly. I know it's crazy but it's true. I love him." It made Eloise feel very vulnerable. Just thinking about that blonde woman had proved that. "What is it with women like that? They always want someone's else man and—" Eloise looked out the window and stiffened. "Holy hell, speak of the slut, it's the trashy tart." The woman in question was heading straight for the door of Voodoo You.

"Here? Where?" Mesopia peered out the window. "I hope she comes in."

Eloise turned on her. "Why?"

"Hey, I need customers and I want to have a look at her." The bell above the door chimed. Both women behind the counter stared. "Can I help you?" Mesopia asked in her best shopkeeper's voice.

The blonde walked with confidence to the counter, as if she had found the competition wanting. "Yes, I am looking for a gift for a male friend."

"A lover?" Eloise asked, trying to keep control. She knew this woman wanted Arrow and she was letting Eloise know it in a less-than-subtle way.

"Someone who will be," the blonde responded with a knowing look.

"Steady," Mesopia murmured to Eloise under her breath as her eyes were thoughtful as she looked into her customer's eyes. "A gift like a charm to make him look past the outer façade and into the real woman?"

The woman laughed. "Oh he is mine, honey. This is just a thank-you gift."

Eloise reached for the yak spit. "This is a lover's balm that sets a man's pulse racing." Or barfing. Either one was possible.

"Yes, he'll make love all night long." Mesopia was happy to go along with what her friend was saying.

"He has no trouble in that department." The blonde looked specifically at Eloise. "But you know that already."

Good. The gloves were off. "Stay away from him."

"Or what? You cannot possibly compete with me."

That was the one thought that betrayed her. How could plain-Jane keep the attention of the hot vampire when other over-obvious charms abounded. Love was one thing but lust was another, and Eloise was yet to be totally convinced that men were not controlled by their cocks.

"Back off." Mesopia grabbed Eloise's arm, pulling her back, to avoid a catfight. "There is nothing we can help you with in here," she told the blonde woman.

"I know that." She smiled in satisfaction before leaving the store.

That she had only come into the store to taunt her maddened Eloise. "Oh I hate her." She pulled free from Mesopia and bolted around counter.

"What are you going to do? Wrestle her to the ground?" Mesopia did not move. She merely watched as Eloise halted at the door.

"Maybe." *What am I doing?* This was not rational. Just because the blonde had inferred something between her and Arrow did not mean it was a fact, and

why was she winding her up? What did she want Eloise to do?

"There is something not quite right about her."

Eloise turned to her friend. "She's trash and smells like a brothel." But yes, Mesopia was right. Most women who she knew of did not carry on in such a blatant manner. The blonde was virtually slapping her with a gauntlet and waiting to see how she reacted.

"True but there's something else, something deeper. It's like she's there but not there."

"Huh?" Eloise needed fact not riddles.

Mesopia shrugged. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it. And no, Arrow would never cheat on you."

That was exactly what Eloise needed to hear. "You think?"

"I know and so do you so stop being a ninny."

Eloise opened her mouth to contradict her statement but Mesopia was right. She was acting like a ninny, spinning from one erratic emotion to the other. "Do you think it's a test?"

"Do you have to be together for that to happen?"

Hmm, where was Arrow?

* * * * *

He had lied to Eloise about the tire. The woman had tried to come on to him as he changed the tire. It had been quite obvious to him that a knife blade had been sliced through the rubber to flatten it.

Arrow stood outside Voodoo You, watching the blonde woman walk away. Her hips swinging, her perfect ass and superb breasts jiggling just enough to attract male attention. Outwardly, the woman looked hot despite the cold waves he felt coming from her. Unlike Eloise, she was not a true natural beauty. She had no subtle flaws that made him smile and wonder and want to know more.

The blonde was something else. She held the outer shape until she passed out of sight of the store and then the façade dissolved and a gray-haired old hag was revealed.

"Of course." A witch was still a witch no matter how she dressed herself up. He'd had a strong suspicion in the supermarket she was a witch. Probably a third order witch if she could morph as she did. So who was she, and what did she want? That it had something to do with Caitriona was obvious. Arrow remembered Mesopia's email research. Any one of those three witches was potential trouble and unlike mortals, Arrow had seen his share of black-hearted harpy witches. They thought only of themselves, and unlike their kinder white witch sisters, they did not care about the lives of others or the destruction they may cause.

That he and Eloise were so close to fulfilling the tests and bringing Caitriona back had to be the reason a witch was circling. He had no doubt that the reappearance of Caitriona on mortal soil was bound to anger a lot of people. One thousand years was a long time. Clearly the lady had enemies. Arrow knew immortal beings held a grudge longer than anyone.

And then it hit him. Arrow knew why the witch was taunting Eloise. It was so obvious he was ashamed he did not realize it sooner. If they succeeded in weakening Eloise to the point of wild and irrational jealousy as they had with her kinswoman, then the tests were not fulfilled and Caitriona did not come back. It would almost certainly mean the end of the Gaunt clan. Last night with Eloise had told him more about the woman he loved. She did not admit feelings easily, but when she did, they were real and true and were not ever taken back. Jealousy was a potent emotion and Eloise being Eloise was quick to act. The thought that she might do so without thinking might ruin what they had.

"I will not let that happen."

"Eloise is headstrong," a voice whispered beside him.

A vague, shimmering form appeared, standing beside him. Caitriona. Arrow was not surprised. The veil between worlds was very thin and that she was so close to coming back made it more so. Arrow could only make out waves of red hair, a sad smile and a buxom frame.

"Yes, she is."

"The witches—"

Arrow heard the fear in her voice. "They will not win. What is the final test?"

"They are."

This surprised Arrow. "You don't you determine the tests?" It was like handing someone the ball and telling them not to shoot the final goal.

"I thought so until now." Caitriona sounded aggrieved. "It seems the gods want to see my life replayed."

Arrow clenched his fists at her words. "Eloise will not die by her own hand." There was no way he would allow that to happen.

"Nor did I."

Her words confirmed something that had puzzled him. Strong people did not commit suicide, nor did they mutter words about redemption and coming back to life. "What happened?"

“That’s a very long story, vampire.”

Arrow could just make out her sad smile. “They always are.”

“Now is not the time to tell it. The reckoning will come. Save Eloise and yourself. You need her.”

“I know.” Eloise had brought life into his lonely world.

“You cannot tell her the truth about Sineag being a witch.” Her hand rested for a moment on Arrow’s arm. “It must play out as the gods decide or none of us will survive this.” Caitriona shivered. “Be careful.”

* * * * *

“Hi, shorty.” Arrow’s eyes went immediately to the woman he loved. She was leaning on the shop counter and looking less than pleased. *Is it me or someone else?* Arrow’s mind went back to that moment in the shower. *Nah, it’s not me.* They both felt too good after that. Just thinking of that made his cock harden. He knew what it was. The witch. Eloise was jealous. Arrow smiled. The idea that he could mean so much to Eloise made his heart pound with excitement.

“Hello.” Eloise surveyed him thoughtfully.

“What’s up?” Should he tell her about his talk with Caitriona? Arrow wanted to be honest with Eloise, but at what cost? What risks did he take?

“Nothing.”

That was enough of a confirmation for Arrow to know yet another problem loomed. He looked forward to the day when there was nothing but the two of them. No ghosts from the past or witches to fight. “Come on, tell me. I’m a good listener.”

Eloise blew out a sigh. “If you wanted someone else you would tell me before you…well, you know…”

That was most definitely the sound of jealousy on her lips. Arrow moved to stand beside her, his hand reaching for hers. “I don’t want to ‘you know’ with anyone else but you, Eloise. You’re stuck with me.”

Eloise looked down at their entwined hands. “What if I wanted to—”

Arrow chuckled at the thought. He knew that once Eloise gave her heart it was forever.

“I could quite easily, you know, with any man,” she retorted, trying to pull her hand from his.

He nodded. Eloise was right. There would be many men who would want her. “But you are mine.” He did not add that not a lot of men were strong enough to handle the tempestuous Eloise, and no woman could manage him as beautifully as she did.

“That sounds awfully possessive there, fang face.”

Arrow liked that she sounded pleased. He leaned in close to her. “I want to ‘you know’ your brains out.” He loved the way she jumped at his suggestion. It was part nerves and part excitement.

Mesopia appeared from the back of the store. “I can only guess what that means. Go for it.”

He needed no further urging. He pulled Eloise into his arms and spun her out of the room.

“Wow! Sex in a bed. Who would have thought that?” They were both naked and standing beside her bed. Eloise had expected to end up in some exotic locale when Arrow had spun her fast and furiously through space. She was pleased to be back in her own home. Dorothy had it right. There was no place like home, especially with the person she loved.

“You seem surprised.” Arrow pushed her down on the soft bedding.

Eloise reached up her hands to him. She craved the feel of his hot, hard flesh against her own. “Have we ever been in a bed together? Seems kind of radical for us.” She sighed in pleasure as Arrow settled between her open legs and his hands massaged her breasts.

“Let’s live dangerously, shorty.”

The loaded cock pushing at her stomach was the kind of danger Eloise liked. “I’m not sure I know how to have sex in a bed,” she teased as the palms of her hands cupped his ass. “All this comfort and sex at the same time. Fancy that.”

“Hey, I can’t help it if you drive me wild and I need to have you immediately regardless of where we are.”

In so many ways that was sexist and domineering. *But damn it. I love it. The way he said it.* “You’re sweet.”

“I adore you.” Arrow kissed her nose playfully.

“Bed sex, huh?”

“Oh it will work.”

And then Arrow kissed Eloise and all things were possible.

* * * * *

"The way they carry on is disgusting." Finella turned her head from the scene on the bed. "Do we have to watch this?"

"They fuck like bunnies. I wouldn't mind biting his ass." Sineag's eyes were glued on the taut flesh in question.

Darragh shook her head in despair. She was stuck with a virgin and a harlot and unfortunately she needed them both to harness their power to save herself. They had followed the pair to the Gaunt woman's house. The plan was to remain invisible and watch to see what information they could find out about the man to make him more susceptible to Sineag's advances. So far her attempts had been pointless. Sineag had declared the vampire was probably gay. Darragh doubted this due to the large, healthy cock that was pressing into the woman's flesh. The vampire and the mortal appeared to be insatiable for each other. She was fast understanding, unlike her friend Caitriona, this one would not believe her man was unfaithful.

Darragh could almost swear she felt Caitriona breathing down her neck. If this pair passed the seventh test and Caitriona came back, then it was the death of the witches. "We have to break them up now." She did not like the sound of desperation in her voice but it was how she felt.

"It's gross what they do to each other." Finella grimaced. "Why would she even want that inside her? It's way too big."

Sineag smiled and licked her lips as they watched the vampire's cock plough back and forward inside the woman. "Tomorrow he is mine."

Darragh exchanged looks with Finella. Break up the lovers. Kill Sineag, destroy Finella and then face Caitriona.

* * * * *

Eloise's nails raked down Arrow's back as his cock slammed into her. This was exactly what she needed. A good, fast fuck. She panted as she tried to keep pace with him but it was too hard, so she wound her legs around his waist and enjoyed the ride. Arrow leaned down and bombarded her lips with wild, hungry kisses.

"Okay?" he murmured against her lips, his thrusts becoming more determined.

"Make me scream," she answered, her hands going down to grab his ass to hold him close. Eloise was so close to climax that she knew it would take very little. She liked being wild and out of control with Arrow. He made her feel so safe and loved and that there was nothing he would not do for her. As her body stiffened with the first thrill of pleasure, she felt tears come in her eyes.

"You're crying." He stopped all movement as his fingers touched the moisture on her face in concern. "I have hurt you. I didn't even think how hard I was pushing you." Arrow started to pull his cock from her body.

"No, don't leave me." Eloise held on to him. "You make me feel so happy, fang face." She hadn't cried for the longest time and then never tears of happiness.

Arrow's hands cradled her face. "Oh shorty, you humble me like no other."

He was the most beautiful man and he was hers. *I can ask for no more.* "Don't get too humble. I like how cocky you are."

Arrow grinned. "You like cocky?" He linked her hands with his and pushed them over her head.

"I love cocky. Now make me come," she urged, and was held as an eager captive beneath him. It was not long before a rush of sensation tore through her body. Eloise felt Arrow jerk hard and come with her. It was a perfect moment. They were perfect.

As they lay still locked together, Arrow leaned in and licked her neck. "I need to taste you."

He wanted her blood. She was happy to give it. "You don't have to ask." Eloise loved the man. She would give him whatever he needed. As his fangs grazed her throat, she pushed him back. "No."

He looked confused. "What?"

"My thigh." She wanted to experience that same feeling she had the other night in the shower. It was so primal and wicked.

"You liked that?" Arrow looked pleased.

"Oh hell yes. I loved that."

He raised up from her body, his cock sliding out from within. "Because you don't have to cover the mark up?"

"I am proud to have your mark on me. I love you. I just like it when you suck on my thigh." The pride she saw in Arrow's eyes made her start to cry again. *He really loves me.*

"Your wish is my command."

"I'll remember that."

Arrow lifted her legs to her shoulders, his eyes on hers as he fastened his mouth to her inner thigh.

The pain was exquisite. It was a moment of needle-thin intensity before a wave of heat flooded her veins and made her limp like a rag doll. It was both relaxing and wildly sexual. It was, once more, perfect.

Chapter Ten

Eloise had the strangest dream. It was a about a man she had never seen before. He ran toward her, his eyes wide with panic and sorrow as he yelled in anguish.

“No, not her. Anyone but her.”

It was so vivid and clear. As Eloise fought the haze of the dream, she felt herself standing next to a woman she knew was Caitriona. The man ran to them.

“No!” he thundered. The man grabbed Caitriona as she fell to the ground. “You cannot do this to us. You have ruined everything.” He cradled the woman in his arms and wept fiercely. “I cannot be without you. You cannot do this to us.” His eyes then locked on Eloise. “Save us. Save her. We must live again.”

Eloise woke with a start. “You cannot do this to us,” she murmured.

“What can’t I do?” Arrow turned over and looked at her.

I have a naked man in my bed. I have someone I have to save. Which is real and which is fantasy, or are they both one and the same? “Um, I was dreaming.” She ran her hand down his chest. What she felt was warm, hard and real. Arrow, her lover. So who was the other man? As much as Eloise may have wanted to shrug the dream off as a flight of fantasy, she knew she couldn’t. He also felt real and Caitriona was now too much a part of her life to dismiss her so easily. She looked at the clock. Looking at Arrow only gave her ideas that would make her late for work. As enjoyable as that was, Eloise needed to think about the dream and that was hard to do with the naked Arrow beside her. “I have to get ready and go to work.” Maybe Mesopia could guide her in some direction. Eloise knew if she told Arrow he would worry and fuss over her.

“You could skip it and stay in bed with me.”

His grin would have made angels drop their knickers. “I need to actually turn up to work occasionally to get paid.” A naked man was offering her heaven and yet she decided to go deal with yak spit. “Later.”

“Promise?”

“Oh God yes.” When Arrow looked at her like that she was ready to promise him the moon tied with a big red bow. Eloise leaned in and kissed him quickly before he had a chance to change her mind. She jumped out of bed and rushed to the shower.

“Chicken,” he teased.

* * * * *

“Fucking bitch,” Eloise cursed as she rounded the corner to Voodoo You and saw the blonde outside the shop. Or at least she thought she did. The woman disappeared before Eloise could park and get out of the borrowed car. “Where the hell did she go?”

“You’re a fool,” said a voice at her side.

Eloise turned to see the shimmering form of a woman. All street noise stopped and it was like they were the only two who existed. “I beg your pardon?” She knew it had to be Caitriona but name-calling didn’t seem to be a smart thing to do right now.

“You heard me, kinswoman. You are a fool.”

Dead people? Were they rude or what? “Hey, I’m not the one who killed myself over a man.” How dumb was that?

Caitriona sighed. “It was a spell.”

“A spell? Like hocus pocus?”

“I have no idea what that is.” Caitriona sounded perplexed.

Right. She was from another time and place. “You know like pulling a rabbit out of a hat.” Eloise realized that wasn’t the best example either.

“Why would you put a rabbit in a hat?”

“You know, I have often wondered that myself.” Eloise looked at the shimmering form. She could make out what appeared to be red hair and a long, flowing dress of cream. “How did you fall for a spell?”

“It’s a long story.”

Eloise arched her eyebrows upward. “Jeez, isn’t everything in our family?” She couldn’t have simple relatives who baked cakes and got drunk at Christmas and fell face first into the eggnog.

“You need to think,” Caitriona told her.

“About what?”

“I cannot tell you.”

What sort of an answer was that? Eloise rolled her eyes. "Great help you are."

"Think, kinswoman," the other urged. "What is important to you?"

"Arrow." He was the first person who came to her mind.

"And?"

"Does there have to be an 'and'?" She looked at Caitriona. Clearly there was something Eloise was missing. "What? You're not going to give me any clue at all? What about charades?"

Caitriona shook her head. "Be smarter than I was."

It was then that Eloise heard something in her voice that she had not heard before. It was despair but also frustration. "You did not kill yourself, did you?" Of course she hadn't. Strong people held on and endured. They did not take the so-called easy way out.

"No."

"And you won't help me." It was not a question. Eloise knew that whatever was twisting Caitriona up inside was not something she could be privy to at that moment.

"I can't." Caitriona's words were tight with emotion. "I need to live again and through you I do."

Eloise jerked away from her at this thought. "Oh wait, this is not some weird body-snatching thing, is it? Because I have to tell you I have grown fond of my cellulite thighs and Arrow is mine." There was no way she would ever share him with another.

"Just be more wise in what you do than I was. Learn from my lesson."

Eloise knew the second Caitriona left her. She heard the cars and street sounds once more. "Great, can my life get any weirder?"

* * * * *

Mesopia looked up from counting the cash in the register as Eloise pushed through the door of Voodoo You. "How are you?"

"I just spoke to a one-thousand-year-old dead woman," Eloise told her as she dumped her purse in its usual place. Some things always remained the same no matter what weirdness she found herself in.

"Oh? Nice. How was she?"

Nothing surprised Mesopia. Eloise suspected there was so much more below the surface of this woman than she would ever get to see. "It was most confusing, actually."

"Dead people usually are."

Eloise looked at the mail stacked on the counter. She picked it up and started sorting through it. "I had this dream last night about a man." Bill, bill, junk and bill. She dumped them back on the countertop. All of those could wait.

"Arrow?"

"No, but I think it may have been Angus." It was the only logical conclusion. Who else would have rushed to Caitriona in such urgency?

Mesopia stopped and looked at her with interest. "Caitriona's man?"

"Yeah, he was asking me to save them and he seemed really pissed off at Caitriona." Eloise still could feel the waves of angry despair coming from the man.

"They were lovers. I wonder why?"

"I don't know. The dead are surprisingly unforthcoming with details."

Mesopia shook her head. "Yeah, but he was a vamp so he would still be alive."

That was true. So why was he asking her for help? And why hadn't he turned up like everyone else had? What was the story there?

"So what now?" Mesopia resumed sorting notes from coins.

"I have no idea. I have Caitriona telling me to be smarter than her and a shadowy man I believe is Angus wanting me to save them." There were times Eloise was flat-out saving herself.

"Tuesday mornings suck sometimes."

"Yeah, and all without coffee." Eloise had left home so fast she had not had her usual breakfast of two cups of coffee.

Mesopia dumped the money in the register and slammed it shut. "So we'll get some caffeine and think about it."

Two cups of coffee later, Mesopia looked at Eloise. "So what do we know?"

That I prefer the espresso roast to the mild blend." Eloise was also feeling a bit better. Having to deal with people without coffee was hard.

"Right, that goes on the shopping list," her friend responded. "But what about the whole dead-relative thing?"

"Okay," Eloise blew out a sigh. "We have witches, a vampire or possibly two and a dead woman looking to come back to life." *No, I couldn't have a normal existence.*

"Correct."

"We have a seventh test to fulfill."

"Also right." Mesopia nodded in agreement.

Eloise thought for a moment. "While I think Caitriona knows what the seventh test is, I have a feeling it's not her call." She could see Mesopia was puzzled by this. "Think about it. She is suddenly telling me I'm a fool and to wise up. You would hardly give a clue if you were in charge now, would you?"

"It's also not very nice if she needs your help."

"Yeah, but I was obsessing over that blonde bitch. I saw her again this morning." Eloise explained what had happened before work.

"Jealousy is hard to overcome sometimes."

And then it hit Eloise. It was so obvious and she was annoyed she had not thought about it before. "That's it!"

"What is?"

"Jealousy." Caitriona would not want to see her going down the same path as her and jealousy could only be controlled by the one who was feeling it. No one could tell her not to be jealous. She had to feel safe within herself to do that. "The story goes that Caitriona killed herself because of jealousy, but she didn't. She told me that much." Eloise still remembered her simple "no".

"So what happened?"

"She wouldn't tell me."

Mesopia sighed. "That's bloody annoying."

"Tell me about it." If they just told her what she needed to do to save all their collective asses Eloise would do it. "So putting two and two together and coming up with seven, I reckon that the last test is one of fidelity for Arrow and jealousy for me." What else could it be? The blonde had to be a part of that. "I bet the blonde is a witch."

"I have heard some of them can change appearance in the blink of an eye." Mesopia looked at her thoughtfully. "Arrow is faithful."

"I'd cut off his balls if he wasn't." In her heart Eloise knew he was true to her and would remain so. "Whatever happens I have to remain strong and not do anything stupid." It sounded good in principle but practice was the hard part.

"So no killing yourself like your dead kinswoman, though technically it appears she did not do it anyway." Mesopia shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. "It's all most confusing." She reached into her pocket and passed over a small brown package the size of her palm. "I'm giving you this for protection."

"If this is more phlegm from an animal—"

"No, it's actually something that is supposed to be a deterrent against witches."

Eloise opened it. A large yellow tooth was threaded on a leather cord. "Lion?"

"Panther."

"Uh-huh." She would need another dozen of these to do any real damage to an attacker but it was the thought that counted. *I guess.*

"It's said that some African tribes have used sacred, blessed panther teeth to deter witches for centuries."

"'It is said' is a tad vague for me."

"It's more about belief. If you believe in something so strongly nothing can break that belief, then you can come through whatever hardship you face."

Eloise arched her eyebrow at her friend. "Who are you, Jiminy Cricket?" Life was not a made-for-television everything-will-turn-out-right-at-the-end concept. Life was hard and sometimes just plain weird.

"Do you love Arrow?"

"Yes." There was no other answer she could give.

"Are you going to let that blonde slut have him?"

"Oh hell no."

"Are you going to pass this last test and save the day?"

"I'll take a crack at it." Eloise saw the disappointment in Mesopia's eyes at her answer. "Yes."

"And you are going to kick the witches' asses?"

"Yes, because I have a tooth and blondes don't always get to have more fun." It was a "go team" moment. Eloise looked once more at the tooth. The power of it escaped her. "So what does the tooth do?"

"No damn idea," Mesopia responded.

"Okay then." It was not like everything else in Eloise's life was clear. What was one more thing? She put it in her pocket.

"Do you know what day it is other than Tuesday?"

"No, but I have a feeling you are going to tell me."

Mesopia was the fount of knowledge concerning all things significant yet odd.

"One thousand years ago to the day is when the memorial was held for Caitriona."

Eloise did not know that and she should have. Her Uncle McManus had probably told her that but at the time she was doing the whole I-don't-want-to-get-involved-with-the-vampire avoidance technique so she probably had her hands over her ears singing la-la-la to not hear him. Yeah maybe some would have called her too stupid to live but they were not living her life. For a long time Eloise had chosen avoidance to action. It was a crazy decision in the light of everything that had since happened. Eloise knew that as she listened as Mesopia told her how she had been researching the Gaunt family.

"The thing was no one could find a body to bury."

That was freaky. "So we're talking a resurrection of sorts today?" That would definitely require another cup of coffee. "So whatever the seventh test is, it will happen today? Any idea what time?" She needed to be as prepared as possible. Though she had the tooth, Eloise had a feeling more would be needed.

"No, but I'd take a guess and say twelve-ish."

That seemed like a stab-in-the-dark time to her. "Because?"

"I'm thinking Caithness, being in the highlands of Scotland, would have been cold and dark for long periods of the day all those centuries ago, so people would have done things when the sun was at its brightest."

That made sense. They would have tried to bury someone when the ground was less frozen and there was some sunshine to stand in to commemorate a life. Midday seemed obvious and it at least gave her a time for when she needed to collect herself and face whatever she had to. It was currently nine thirty. Where was Arrow? Visions of the man lying naked in her bed made her hot all over. Or was he in his own bed? Did he even have a home? She had been so caught up in the sexuality of the man that she had not thought of practicalities. She called out his name and he appeared at her side. Excellent. This was cheaper than a cell phone.

"This is such a cute relationship." Mesopia smiled at them.

"It's going to happen today."

"I know," Arrow responded with a nod.

"You know? How can you know?"

"I spoke to Caitriona but I can't tell you what about." His hands linked with hers.

"Jeez, and I'm related to her." Eloise knew she had to focus. If and when her relative came to life, then she would deal with the family disloyalty thing. "I had this dream about a man."

Arrow looked at her in surprise. "What man?"

"It doesn't matter who he was."

"Oh yes it does."

"Are you jealous?" Weird that he could be. Eloise had never had someone so interested in her before. Although jealousy was wrong, it was also flattering,

"Just wondering why you did not mention it this morning."

"Settle, petal." Eloise put her hand on his shoulder. *To think, I can control all this.* "Actually, I think he may have been Angus."

Arrow relaxed under her hand. "Caitriona's Angus?"

"Yes, and what he said had me thinking." Eloise told Arrow about how she believed the final test had to be about jealousy as they had covered almost every other issue lovers could get caught up in. "And we think this is all going to happen around noon today." She surveyed his grave expression. "Am I close?"

"I cannot say. I want to but I promised Caitriona."

That was sweet. Annoying but sweet. "You're loyal. I'll give you that." Eloise turned to Mesopia. "So if we were to be anywhere at noon, where would be the most likely place for this test to occur?" Unlike police speed traps to catch motorists, no one publicized occult happenings on the radio.

"The cemetery."

"Why? Because of atmosphere?"

"Yes, and consecrated ground never hurts. I'll also look up some words you can chant. You know, just in case."

"Just in case" was not a scenario Eloise wanted to deal with.

"We will survive this, shorty."

"Damn straight we will." Eloise hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

Chapter Eleven

Arrow leaned on a tombstone and critically assessed his surroundings. He was aware that the cemetery on the north side of Brisbane was a hangout for the local vampires. Luckily for him, few of them could handle the sunlight so he was left on his own. Arrow knew Eloise was close by watching and wearing an ugly old tooth around her neck, which she believed protected her from witches. He hoped she was right as any witches he had ever met were angry when thwarted and he had a feeling these ones would be no different.

The plan was to wait for the blonde woman to appear. So far she had been everywhere Arrow had been. It was almost noon. He could almost feel the air crackle with electricity. Something was about to happen. As if on cue the blonde arrived.

"You were waiting for me?" She simpered and arched herself forward, her breasts on display in the tight blouse.

Maybe once he would have taken what was on offer as Arrow adored women, but now there was only one woman for him. No one could compete with Eloise. Besides the artificial never interested him and that was all this woman could ever be. "Yes, I was."

"I'm all yours."

Out the corner of his eye he saw Eloise coming straight at them like an avenging angel. If the situation wasn't so serious he would have smiled. *She is so cute.* "But I do not want you."

"Come on," she whispered as she ground her pelvis toward him in invitation. "I know you want me."

Not even if you were the last woman on Earth. Arrow watched as Eloise stumbled in her haste to get to them. She picked herself up and kept moving. The look of determination on her face was inspiring. Whether Eloise admitted it or not, what she did was for them so they could be together. *She is mine.*

"No, there is only one I will ever want."

"And that's me, you old bag." Eloise rounded on the woman, taking her by surprise. "And why would any decent man want a complete and utter slut who is anyone's for the taking."

The blonde moved to stand beside Arrow. "He is mine." Her red talon nails caught at his arm.

"Oh piss off! As if he would take on a trollop like you. He has more sense than that."

"You will pay for that," the blonde woman seethed.

As much as Arrow wanted to interfere, he knew that it was Eloise's test to deal with jealousy and move on without it destroying her. Besides, he had to admit it was exciting seeing Eloise do battle. She was feisty and totally in control.

"Oh I don't think so." Eloise stood hands on hip, ready to do whatever she had to. "Women like you cannot upset me because I have much more class in one fingernail than you have in your entire body. Added to that, I understand that the power of true love cannot be overshadowed by a quick fuck with any available body. Besides, you're a witch. I am so much better than you are."

Arrow smiled, his face softening at Eloise's words. *How I love her.*

"He kissed me." The blonde looked at her in challenge.

"He did not. God only knows where you have been and what germs you may have picked up. He's not that silly."

"Vampires think with their cocks," the witch pointed out.

Eloise looked at Arrow and smiled. That was sort of true but not in the way she meant. They enjoyed sex and were not beyond manipulating it for their own purposes but only if the woman was willing. Eloise looked the witch up and down in disgust. She was tired of her and the whole Caitriona thing. She pulled the tooth out from under her shirt and held it in front of her like a talisman. *I hope like hell this is not something out of a bubblegum machine.*

What's that? A tooth?" The blonde cackled in amusement. "Looking for the tooth fairy? She doesn't exist, honey."

Well, crap. Eloise had expected a bolt of lightning or at least an eerie light that would have driven the witch to her knees in fright instead of making her laugh her ass off. Eloise looked at Arrow. What now? Before she had time to think, the other woman took that moment to charge at her. Eloise had never fought anyone before. She was a talker not a fighter. She saw Arrow move in to stop the witch but Eloise got in first. It was pure instinct and female hormones that made her bunch up her fist and smack the witch's face. The blonde stumbled backward in shock. Eloise grabbed her hand. "Shit that hurt." She held her hand up to her chest as her bones vibrated in pain.

"Never use a closed fist, shorty," Arrow advised as he stepped over the witch and went to her. "The heel of your hand is better." He took her hand in hers and massaged it gently.

Now he tells her. "Well, being a girl I never got to learn that." Hitting people always looked so much easier in the movies.

"I like that you're a girl." Arrow grinned her.

He was so sweet and sexy that Eloise felt a familiar wetness between her legs. She smiled back at him.

"You are doomed."

Oh fuck, that's right. They had blonde bitch to deal with. Eloise looked at her. "I am not my kinswoman, you piece of pus. I know what you're up to and you will not win with me." She pulled her hand from Arrow's. *Keep faith in the tooth. Mesopia would never lead you astray.* "You will never mess with another Gaunt woman again." Eloise held the tooth up once more and started to chant the Latin words that her friend had given her. "Please, God, let them be right," she muttered to herself as her attention focused on the witch.

"Expello vos, pereio vos. Caligo nostrum ago haud magis Diligo est validus quam contemno Nostrum fortuna est nostri unus. Expello vos, pereio vos."

Before Eloise's eyes, skin started to peel off the blonde to reveal the gray, haggard skin of the witch. She was as ugly as sin. Eloise jumped back in shock as the old woman screamed at her in anger.

"You have no idea what you have done. You will pay for this. I am not alone in what I do."

Eloise knew that but she refused to flinch from the cold, hard stare of the witch as she started to disintegrate before her eyes. Eloise felt Arrow's hands pulling her back toward him. She gratefully accepted the protection of his body.

The witch gave one last scream of frustration and exploded into a million pieces.

"Nasty." Eloise shuddered within his arms, glad that she was not alone. "Bloody hell that was hard to say." She turned her face to his. "It's much easier to say banish thee and perish thee in English." Eloise'd had so little time to practice the words that she worried that she was either destroying a witch or ordering a pizza with extra cheese as she said them.

"I like the bit about our love being strong and our fate ours to determine."

That Arrow knew Latin did not surprise her. "I bet I could have said that in English but Mesopia likes drama."

Arrow nodded his head. "But it worked. That's the main thing."

"Yes, and I did not give in to jealousy." Of course that was easy to say now that she knew her adversary had been an ugly old crone.

"Because you're smart." He kissed her cheek and pressed her close to him.

Eloise sighed. This was not over by any means. "Not that smart. We still have a couple of pissed-off witches on our tail."

Arrow chuckled suddenly. "You really smacked the blonde one."

"I wanted to kill her for touching you," Eloise responded, remembering the wave of anger that had overcome her when she had touched Arrow. "It's okay to be possessive. That's not the same as jealousy." Though, she did now understand how people lost control when faced with another trying to take what they loved most.

"It's a fine line, shorty."

"Hey, we're both still alive, aren't we?" Eloise looked around her. "So where is Caitriona? I thought she would appear seeing as how I passed the test."

"I have a feeling we need to find and take out the other witches."

"It's always something." Eloise sighed, she was tired but would do whatever she had to in order to end this. "You would think Caitriona could do something to help." A thousand-year-old woman would know a thing or two, surely.

"Patience. This will all be over soon and we will be together."

"Yeah well, the whole patience-and-virtue thing never worked with me." Thank God patience had not been one of the tests. "Where to now?"

"I believe back to the shop and see Mesopia."

Eloise had an uneasy feeling. "Do you think she is in danger?" That she could have placed Mesopia in that situation scared her.

"I think we need to get back." He held her close in his arms. "We will all get through this, shorty."

Arrow's words gave her courage. She held on to him as he spun them out of the graveyard.

* * * * *

"Damn it!" Darragh howled in anger. "That's why I could not track her. She had the tooth." They stood unobserved and away from the action at the cemetery. Everything Darragh had worked for was crumbling beneath her. Could anything be salvaged? She had waited one thousand years for the odds to turn back in her favor. That a weak and paltry human stood in her way was galling. Darragh cared not about Sineag. She would take what she could from Finella for the final battle.

"She knows the old curse." Finella looked uneasy. "What do we do now?"

"It's time to take hostages." They had to gather whatever ammunition they could. Caitriona was coming back to life and Darragh would do whatever she had to in order to survive. The key to this was the current Gaunt woman. Weaken her and she weakened the clan.

* * * * *

"Man, I'm just in here to buy yak spit." Swerve held the bottle up in his hand. "Be at peace."

"Stay where you are," Darragh commanded.

Finella looked uncomfortable. "Why doesn't he have any clothes on?" she whined as she looked from the naked man to his clothes on the counter.

Mesopia stood beside Swerve. "Neither woman is here."

"But they will be." Darragh felt certain of that. "She is your friend. She needs you." There was no doubt in her mind that the pierced one had given Eloise the spell. There was an untapped power that flowed from her. Darragh turned on the man. "Put your clothes on." She couldn't concentrate on the task at hand with a cock in her face.

"You would feel happier and more at peace if you went naked." Swerve's words were gentle.

"I don't think we need to see that, Swerve," Mesopia quickly intervened. She assessed the two witches. "What are you frightened of?"

"Nothing." The response came out almost too quickly from Darragh. She cursed herself for showing fear.

"I expect by now Eloise has destroyed one of your kind, therefore lessening your power. From what stories I have read of you, I think only one of you can survive Caitriona's awakening, if any of you do at all." Mesopia did not cower nor flinch at the angry, haggard faces before her. "What did you do to her?"

"It wasn't my fault," Finella whined as she wrung her hands as if she had suddenly realized the true state of her predicament. "Darragh had been Caitriona's friend but she wanted to use her for her own means."

"Bummer," Swerve murmured. "That's bound to be bad karma, dude."

Mesopia hushed him. "For what purpose? What did you hope to achieve?"

Darragh sighed as she contemplated usurping Finella's powers then and there. She was no use to her for anything else. "Caitriona did not understand her power. She could have married the richest man in the country. Her children would have gone on to wealth and power."

"As you would have," Mesopia added knowingly. "How did you lose your humanity?"

Finella answered that one. "She dabbled with the black arts in her need to manipulate Caitriona."

"Wow, that's heavy stuff." Swerve hastily made the sign of the cross before him. "Really bad juju."

"I had to." How would these mortals ever understand the likes of power? "She fell in love with the vampire and that ruined everything."

Eloise and Arrow spun into the store at that moment. "So you killed Caitriona." Although wobbly on her feet, Eloise's eyes ran over Mesopia to make sure she was not injured. She turned to the man at her side. No matter how many times she had seen Swerve naked it was always a shock. Eloise shook her head and smiled at the little finger wave of recognition he gave her. Swerve was of their world but not.

"He's naked." Arrow's voice was low and he sounded confused.

"Yes." But a bobbing cock in a red thatch of hair was easier to deal with than the two witches who stared at them in malevolence.

"We did not kill Caitriona," Finella told her, not scared but not completely confident of the situation she found herself in.

"But she did not die by her own hand." That was increasingly more obvious to Eloise.

The two witches changed uneasy looks. "No."

"It had to be a spell." Mesopia stated what the others were thinking.

"Not from us." The witches were quick in their need to escape blame.

Arrow looked thoughtful. "I believe there is someone else who does not like Caitriona."

Eloise had not thought of that. "Who?" Didn't they have enough problems at the moment?

"I suspect we will find out soon."

Great. Perfect. And Mondays were supposed to be the days that sucked, not Tuesdays. Eloise turned back to the witches. "So why would you care if Caitriona came back to life? Do you think she seeks revenge for what you did?" If it were Eloise she would, but then she was a Scorpio and tended to take betrayal badly.

"You have no idea what you are letting yourself in for." Darragh's eyes were dark on hers. "There are forces that exist that would turn your pathetic life upside down."

Eloise snorted in derision. "Like I haven't worked that out yet." These past days had been the freakiest of her life. She shook her head. Some of this still did not make sense to her. "Okay I'm confused. If Caitriona did not die because of jealousy, then why did she die? And, more importantly, why have we gone through the tests that we have?" What was that about? Yes, it had brought Arrow into her life, but at what cost?

"Because I knew it was the only way I could come back." The voice of Caitriona Gaunt filled the shop. "I had to say what I did and link us together for I knew in my heart only a woman of the future could save me."

Eloise stood and watched in amazement as her ancestress appeared before her. This was no shimmering apparition. This was a full-bodied woman in a long, flowing cream gown with waves of rich red hair and intelligent green eyes.

Swerve clapped his hands in excitement. "Magic is awesome."

Yes it was. "You're real." It was strange coming face-to-face with her kinswoman.

"As are you." Caitriona smiled at Eloise and then at Arrow before her gaze turned icy as she turned to the two witches.

Eloise felt a shiver run down her spine at the venom she saw in Caitriona's green eyes. She felt Arrow's arm curl around her waist. This was one of those "shoot-out at the OK Corral" moments where it was clear the bad guys were screwed.

Darragh started mumbling something under her breath. Finella doubled over in pain and the room filled with an oppressive heat.

"Crap it's hot." Eloise pulled at the collar of her shirt. Maybe the naked Swerve was the only smart one.

"She is taking her power." Caitriona's voice was hard and unforgiving. "It will not work, Darragh. I know what you did to me and you will pay for it no matter how strong you try to be. You and I both know I am more powerful."

The mumbling got louder and the radiated heat intensified. Eloise looked at Arrow. Both of them could only stand by and watch as this was no longer something they had control over.

However, Swerve was not so still. He pitched the bottle of Tibetan yak spit at Darragh and clocked her on the head. She fell to her knees beside Finella. Swerve looked at Eloise. "I told you it would save the world."

Caitriona smiled at him. "You are a man of great power yet few realize it."

Swerve nodded at her words. Eloise was agog. Great power? Really? She knew looks could be deceiving, but did deception go this deep? "What do we do now?"

"I finish this." Caitriona walked over and stood before the two witches. She raised her hands above her head and she spoke.

"Une mille l'année J'ai attendions pour vous. Une mille l'année plus de vous vouloir pourriture dans enfer. *Allez à ce monde. Enfer attendez vous.*"

As the last words were delivered, a blast of cold air shot through the room and froze the witches solid.

"What the—?" Eloise watched as their frozen forms were picked up and pulled backward out the door until they disappeared into nothing.

"That's French," Swerve informed them. "The lady just condemned them both to hell for one thousand years. It's like cosmic payback."

Eloise's mouth dropped open in surprise. Arrow placed his finger under her chin and smiled. "Never judge a book by its cover or in this case lack there of." He pointed to Swerve's clothes. "Time to put some clothes on, man."

"Why do I feel this is not over?" Eloise knew there had to be more to this.

"For you it is." Caitriona's gaze was kind on her. "For me, I have a longer road to travel."

There was sadness in her kinswoman's voice that upset Eloise. What chance of life had this woman had? What else was in store for her? "How did you die?"

"Evil men abound," Caitriona responded simply.

"And?"

"To tell you more would endanger you."

Eloise shook her head. "You can't leave me hanging like this." She knew there was a story just waiting to be told.

"All you need to know is the man who stands by your side is yours completely. Do not give him up no matter what you are faced with. Believe in your heart,

Eloise.”

Chapter Twelve

Caitriona gasped as the air outside the shop hit her lungs. “On my,” she murmured as she looked around the busy streets. “What a strange place this is.”

“That’s right. You’ve been out of it for a thousand years.” Not to mention Australia was the other side of the world from where Caitriona had come from. “Where have you been?” Had she been like Sleeping Beauty awaiting a lover’s kiss? Eloise thought of Arrow. She had been like that until he came into her life and woke her up.

“I have been peering through a cloudy veil and waiting for you.” Caitriona coughed several times.

“Yeah, we call that stuff smog. We’ve pretty much ruined the planet since your time.” How amazing would it be to travel into the future and start afresh in a world that was foreign? Arrow had left the two of them to talk. Caitriona was reluctant to say much.

“Kinswoman,” Caitriona said, taking Eloise’s hands. “There are not enough words to thank you for saving me.”

“You’re family.” There was nothing else she would have done. Eloise wondered what her Uncle McManus would think if he saw her now. *I did good.* “Besides I’m not sure how much saving I did.” It was more a case of stumbling around and hoping for the best.

“You believe in your man and your combined love is what brought me back.”

Eloise smiled as she thought back to their first meeting. *To think I was going to drop Arrow like a rock.* Not that she could have of course. It was just back then she was so angry at the fate that had been thrust upon her that she said the first angry words that came into her head. *He probably was laughing his ass off.* “So what now?”

“I must find Angus.”

“The guy you killed yourself—well, I guess didn’t really kill yourself—over?” Caitriona was dead, but not. What was that called exactly?

“Yes, I must find him.”

“Do you still love him?”

Caitriona looked wistful. “I, um.” She stopped and thought for a moment. “Life is never that easy, Eloise. You know that.”

Yes, she did. “Is Angus your soul mate?” That he was still alive indicated there was some connection between them but not necessarily the hearts-and-flowers kind.

“Soul mates are bound by trust.” Her eyes locked with Eloise’s. “We have some issues regarding that.”

Issues? Eloise could only imagine what they would be. She wondered what really had happened with Angus and the witch. Was it more insecurity on Caitriona’s part? Did she believe something that was not there? Or had he done something to her? It made her think about her own first reactions to Arrow. What if she hadn’t trusted him? What if they had never met? Eloise was no dewy-eyed romantic, but the thought of not having Arrow in her life made her shiver.

“You and he were always meant to be regardless of what else may have crossed your path, Eloise,” her kinswoman said as if reading her mind.

“Do you even know where to find Angus?” As small as the world had become, Eloise knew there had to be parts of it that humankind would never venture into or understand.

“I won’t have to. He will come to me.” Caitriona’s voice was strong and assured.

Eloise sighed as she thought about a lover finding his way to the side of the woman he loved regardless of what peril or consequence he had to face. “That’s so sweet.” In her heart she knew Arrow would be the same.

“Angus will come and try to kill me.”

Huh? The pretty pink bubble of romance crashed to the ground. “What? Kill you?”

“Don’t worry about me, kinswoman,” Caitriona replied as she straightened her sleeves as if she did not have a care in the world. “He does not hate me.”

“Yeah, but killing does not indicate love.” That she was taking it all so matter-of-factly made Eloise wonder who was the sane one.

Caitriona reached over and touched her arm. “Go be with your man. I have things to do. Don’t worry about me. I can look after myself.”

“Will you come back?” Surely it could not end like this?

“I will find you,” Caitriona told her. “Keep safe, kinswoman.”

“But I—” Before Eloise could finish her sentence Caitriona disappeared. Arrow appeared at her side. “She’s gone.”

“I know.” Arrow linked her hand with his.

Eloise looked at him in puzzlement. “Wait a second, I though she was supposed to come back to life as a mortal. We mortals don’t do that disappearing thing.” She blew out a breath. Why was she even trying to work it out? Had anything been simple since Arrow had come into her world? “I want to go home. Come with me.” All she needed was to be with him. Everything else could wait until tomorrow to be dealt with.

“I’d follow you anywhere.” Arrow’s hip nudged hers. “Do you still have Mesopia’s car?”

“Yeah but—” And then it hit Eloise. “You can’t spin me out of here?”

“No, we passed the test. We are true soul mates. I am mortal now.” He smiled at her surprise. “I can’t spin you off to exotic locations anymore.”

Like she cared about that. *Soul mates*. Eloise liked the sound of that. “I don’t need foreign climes. Besides, spinning was giving my inner ear hell.” *Oh he has such a beautiful smile*. “You still have your fangs.” Eloise was glad. They were sexy.

“I will always be a vampire.”

Eloise shivered as she remembered the feel of his teeth on her inner thigh. “That’s good, for I’d miss that.”

“I will spend the rest of my life making sure you miss nothing, Eloise.”

* * * * *

Eloise lay beside Arrow, her legs tangled with his, her body wet from the combined sweat of their lovemaking. Thirty minutes earlier they had barely made it through the front door of her home before they started to pull each other’s clothes off on their way to the bedroom. They had detoured to the sofa as the need was so great.

“Condom.” They had stopped at the pharmacy on the way home as now that Arrow was no longer immortal the same rules did not apply and they had not had time to discuss the logistics of their future life together.

“I have never used one of these.” Arrow fiddled with the package.

“Don’t look at me. I’ve had no experience with them.” Though she was more than happy to learn. While bare cock was nice, she wanted to see what the blue ribbed condoms that she had chosen would look like.

Arrow smiled, pleased by her words. “Yeah, that’s right. It has and will only ever be me.”

That was sexist and possessive but Eloise liked the sound of his words. “Just hurry.”

“Anxious? Needy?” he asked as he rolled the rubber down his shaft.

“I’m empty and so hot.” She liked the way his hands fumbled at her words. Eloise knew she was not the only one rapidly losing control.

“I will rectify that immediately.”

“Talk is cheap.” Eloise lay back with her arms over her head.

Arrow’s eyes went immediately to her breasts, nipples pointing skyward. “You saying I can’t walk the walk?”

“I’m waiting, fang face.” Her legs fell apart in open invitation. “I need a nice hard fuck and that blue-covered cock of yours looks awfully nice. Or do I have to do it myself?” Her hands strayed down between her legs.

“Oh how you try my patience, dear Eloise.” The condom snapped into place and Arrow covered her body as he kissed her lips hungrily.

“I wanted you in the pharmacy,” she murmured in between kisses as her hands went down to stroke his butt cheeks.

“I know. I felt your hand on my ass.” Arrow licked along her jawline and down to her neck.

“You shouldn’t bend over to pick stuff up. It gives a woman all sorts of ideas.” She had shamelessly taken advantage of him in the pharmacy, running her hand along the fabric-covered bulge at his crotch and then along the crack of his ass. Arrow had coughed and the chemist had recommended an elixir. Eloise had just smile and nodded, agreeing that “flu season was terrible this year”.

“You are very bad, shorty.” Arrow pulled her legs up over his shoulders.

She was totally exposed to him and she loved it. There was so much freedom in loving Arrow. “Going to teach me a lesson, fang face?”

“Oh yeah.” Arrow pushed his cock inside her.

“O-oh, that’s good.” His pace was as frantic as was the beat of her heart. There would be plenty of time later for slow, leisurely lovemaking. “Do you know what would be better?”

“I would love to bite your thigh right now but I’m not a contortionist.” He continued to pound away inside her.

“I expect you to work on that.”

“With pleasure, Ms. Gaunt.” Arrow pulled out and slammed back into her. “Can I bite your neck instead?”

“I am yours.” Eloise waited for the first sweet sting of his fangs on her neck. She sighed as it was followed by the familiar rush of heat that she craved. “Oh

Arrow," she moaned as the twin sensation of mouth and cock made her body shake. No more words were needed as he drove her on to an orgasm that made her scream for more.

About the Author

Amarinda Jones believes anything is possible and sometimes just asking for the impossible will surprise someone enough that they will give it to you. Writing is like that. Put it out there and wait for a response. There is always the possibility you may fall on your ass, but after all, that's what cellulite is for. Amarinda believes in taking chances, speaking her mind and aging disgracefully. Twenty years from now she plans on being the neighborhood witch who all the kids are scared of. But then, everyone has to have a hobby.

Amarinda welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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